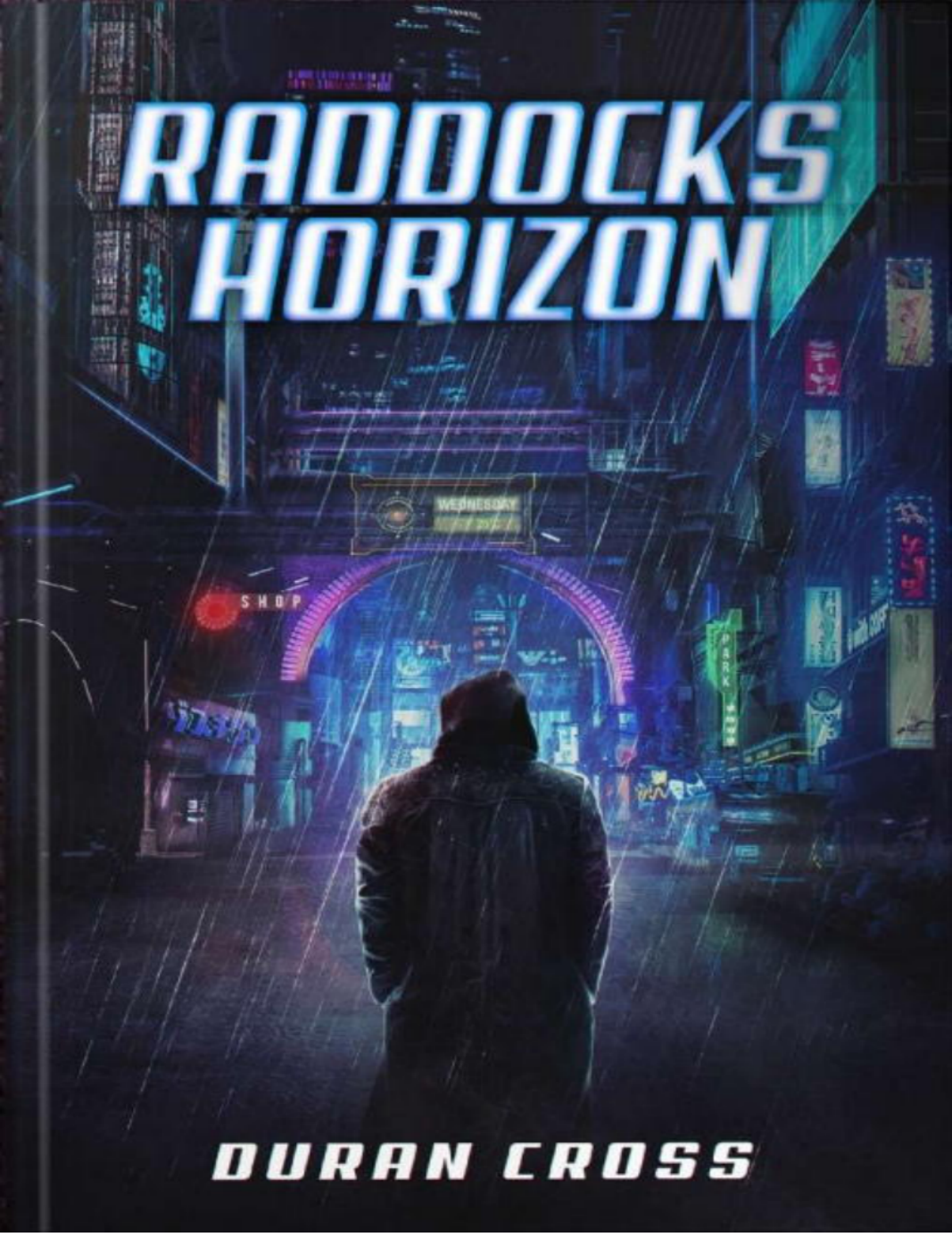
RADDOCKS
HORIZON
WEDNESDAY
SHOP
PARK
DURAN CROSS

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

In 2319 a damaged war veteran and a sociopathic geneticist find themselves facing a terrifying plague and a vengeful android left over from a devastating war. As desperation mounts to halt the disease, one question arises: what will have the higher body count, the virus or the doctor? Cover art by oliviaprodesign

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Duran Cross
RADDOCKS HORIZON

For Lisa, who brought Rennin Farrow to life.

For Kell and Timothy, who helped make this coprocopia readable.

For Michael, I'm sorry it's not on 2-ply like you wanted.

And for Jacob, who gave me the steelcapped kick up the arse I needed.

"I will kill one to save two. Thousands to save millions."

-William Caufmann.

1.
The Sniper and the Doctor

April 10, 2319.

It has been thirteen years since the war that nearly destroyed the entire solar system, and in that time Godyssey Watchman Rennin Farrow has been constructing an impenetrable shield of sarcasm.

At least that's what his workmates think.

They believe he is weird; he talks to himself and has the most bizarre sense of humour. Occasionally, one of his co-workers will make the mistake of falling into a verbal skirmish with him. Every time, they quickly find out just how bare they can be stripped by his tongue.

Doctor William Caufmann, the only man with a worse reputation, sits across from Rennin, staring at him. Caufmann's penetrative green eyes shine unnaturally behind the reflective red lenses of his glasses.

Rennin can feel them boring into his head.

He shifts in his seat, unconsciously attempting to shake the feeling of interrogation. The watchman knows how Caufmann makes the other staff incredibly nervous, and battles with his instincts to remain calm. The doctor is currently reviewing the security footage that's landed Rennin into this grown up version of detention.

Caufmann eventually looks up from his screen and speaks but Rennin could swear his mouth never moved, "Well?"

Rennin looks at him, "Well what?"

"This is the third fist fight you've been involved with this year."

"A fight is when *two* or more people are fighting *each other*," Rennin amends. "As I recall I was struck and the surveillance would show that I did not strike first, or in retaliation."

"Your mouth is what would have instigated the 'strike', I imagine."

"My mouth hurts, shouldn't that be the end of it?" says Rennin rubbing his jaw.

Caufmann emits an intensely artificial sigh. "Perhaps you'd be happier on Iyatoya?"

Rennin's glare turns fierce. "Bit on the claustrophobic side even for a space station, and I'm loathe to be away from my family."

Caufmann isn't intimidated in the least, which is rare for someone Rennin considers a pencil pushing little doctor. "Those charred cinders that used to be your parents?"

Rennin's left eye twitches. "And sister," his look turns to absolute

ice. He can feel a ball of fiery anger trying to engulf him from within, “Your bedside manner astounds me, doctor.”

“Clearly it takes a little more to upset you than it does your colleague.”

Caufmann smiles his enigmatic smile and stands up. Rennin feels the instinctive need to back away. Caufmann’s predatory body language is unsettling. “I don’t mean to offend,” the doctor says still smiling, “That’s what you told your co-worker isn’t it? Before the fight started?”

Rennin looks away clenching his jaw. *If Caufmann was anyone else…* “Are you going to fire me, or not?”

Caufmann laughs, “Fire you? I should promote you.”

Rennin raises an eyebrow.

“Nobody really likes alpha male bigmouths, particularly not me, and it’s far worse when two get together. Though you’re still useful for the time being. You’ll be staying on as watchman, but alone for a while.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know the concept of alpha male comes from pack animals like wolves. Personally I find it difficult to take anyone seriously if they base how they conduct themselves by emulating dogs,” says Caufmann staring hard at Rennin.

“Are you—”

“Though in future try to hold your tongue,” says the doctor neatly cutting him off. “If someone bothers you, you report it to your superior instead of starting an argument that wastes my time having to reprimand you. Again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have work to do, get out.”

“Don’t you mean ‘dismissed’, sir? I thought you were all for protocol.”

Caufmann puts both hands on his desk, leans forward slightly and continues smiling. Despite the desk’s solid construction, Rennin can hear it creak. “Leave.”

Rennin gets up instantly and leaves, unsuccessfully attempting to cover his shudder of dread with a sarcastic sigh.

◆◆◆

The Godyssey Laboratory perches above the city of Raddocks Horizon, a target shaped edifice when viewed from orbit, situated in what was once the Alpine Shire. It is two hundred and eighty kilometres north of the blast site formerly known as Melbourne. The

former city's destruction was the catalyst that started the nine-year CryoZaiyon War between the first sentient androids and the Gorai Aurelia humanists. The war thrust focus in that part of the world to the more recently developed city of Raddocks Horizon.

The city is comprised of three main concentric rings: Outer-city, Inner-city and Centre-city districts. From the middle it is divided like a pie into four inner wedges and eight outer wedges. The founding families own all the inner four wedges of land. From above, the city spreads out in a giant version of the Godyssey insignia.

The largest of the four sections of Centre-city, belongs to the Raddocks family, controlled by the self financed lord of the domain.

The Lab exists on a wedge in the inner western quadrant of the city. From the street, Godyssey's main building appears as an obelisk, ominous and isolated, its grassy environs stretching to protective walls on every side. The watchtower, with its video relays of every side of the obelisk, guarantees this sanctity remains.

Rennin is one of the more infamous employees of this arm of Godyssey Company; his work within the watchtower of the Godyssey lab ensures his notoriety. Through rumour at least.

Physically, Rennin takes after his father. His black hair and solid six-foot two-inch frame were inherited, along with an intimidating glare and a fighter's stance. His appearance also betrays the Indigo Reign mutation, inescapable since his infection during his service as a soldier, tinting his irises violet over his natural blue-grey. His translucent skin and maroon tinged lips further convey the Indigo Reign that still courses through his body but only adds to his intimidation factor.

Rennin is stalking across the grass, hands shoved in pockets, returning to his watchtower from his most recent reprimand from Doctor Caufmann. From the corner of his eye, he notes one of the scientific staff walking the opposite way, one side of his mouth quirks slightly as he decides to entertain himself. They hate him anyway, and Rennin can't help but be antagonistic.

Before his target passes, Rennin spits just ahead of him.

The lab worker's stride stutters slightly, but as expected he says nothing. Not now, not to his face. Instead, he hurries off on his personal mission, head turned aside as Rennin stifles a snigger.

Humans. Shit sacks. You wouldn't last ten seconds on the frontline.

"Less with me in command," he mutters to himself.

Towards the end of the war, Rennin made Sergeant and he was responsible for his troops. He took every casualty as a personal insult until one fateful day he lost his entire platoon and the personal insult was so intense something of himself died with them.

Until that point, he hadn't thought he had anything left to lose.

The lieutenant of the mission was the only other survivor. CryoZaiyon Lieutenant Saifer Veidan. He was the second in command of the android battalions and one of the most durable androids ever made.

Rennin always thought it strange that there was a commander who was irrefutably in charge, followed by a group of captains *then* Lieutenant Veidan, yet for some reason Saifer Veidan was the second in charge. Android ranking did tend to differ slightly to the human army though. One of his troops once said that for some reason the CryoZaiyons worked like the warriors of ancient times, with a general and their lieutenant, whereby everybody else was secondary.

Rennin wishes the CryoZaiyons were still around. *Even the crazy ones were more reliable than people.*

He reaches the door to his tower and presses his thumb to the read plate. A female voice greets him with the usual welcome on behalf of the Godyssey Corporation in the attempt to make it seem like someone actually gives a damn about the weird guy standing in the little room on top of the North East Clock Tower.

People inside the lab have smart mouths of their own, he muses, despite the kind of firepower he has at his command. The clock tower tells the time and Rennin always smirks when he thinks that it also tells the time of death for anyone Caufmann orders taken down.

Not that the white-coats ever know how or when their co-workers expire, but sometimes the anonymity excites Rennin to the point of feeling a pulse at the front of his pants. *Time up, my friend.*

He's technically a security guard but sometimes he feels more like a hitman. He is in charge of opening and closing the front gates, and of executing any of the staff that attempt to flout their contract. Any scientist attempting to escape while working on secret projects are put down. Though 'escape' is not the word he was told. In fact he can't recall the word Caufmann used when describing this job to him.

Secrecy is of top priority to Godyssey, and Rennin is in charge of enforcing it. He has the choice of using a turret defence system or his sniper rifle. He's only had to shoot two so far.

That's not so bad, I killed dozens upon dozens during the war.

Twenty years ago, he was just a pissed off kid. Now Rennin is in his mid forties, though maintaining his fitness keeps him looking early thirties on a good day. So he tells himself.

The door to the clock tower flies up into the bulkhead, revealing the spiral staircase that snakes up three floors to the lookout. After the climb, he opens the door to see the empty chair usually occupied by his ex co-worker, Wayne Carr. Rennin smirks, *Wanker.*

That's what actually started the fight.

Rennin laughs at how it's such a juvenile reason to get upset. Just

by increasing the speed of saying Wayne Carr really got his colleague worked up. Rennin has no doubt that it is merely repressed anger from school.

The watchman settles in his chair on the left, allowing himself to sink into the seat. *Should be a breeze with no idiots around asking to be made fun of.*

Three hours later, Rennin is back in Caufmann's office.

The doctor looks even less impressed than before, but surprisingly no worse for wear. Suddenly Rennin isn't so sure Caufmann ever sleeps.

Occasionally Rennin has radioed Caufmann at ridiculous hours of the morning drunk out of his skull just to play the latest amusing music video he's found on the Solarnet.

"You *want* company up there now?"

"Yes, sir."

Caufmann scoffs, "Denied."

"Why?"

"You might think I'm stupid but my salary suggests otherwise—"

Rennin interjects, "Money isn't everything."

"—and I know you only want someone else to bait and mentally torment until another inevitable fight breaks out," says Caufmann, smoothly overriding the watchman.

"Your powers of deduction leave me awed, sir."

Caufmann stares at Rennin for a long moment, "Very well. There's an android I need to test domestically, I'll have him over there by the time you return." He taps a few buttons on his wrist. Rennin peers curiously at the communication gauntlet, sure he has never seen one that looks so *imbedded* before. Rennin can't tell whether the interface is built into his body or if the whole arm is synthetic. Caufmann pulls his right sleeve back down to cover it.

"What android, sir?" the watchman asks, returning his attention to the subject at hand.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I am not in the Army? You do not have to address me as 'sir' at any time, ever."

"It helps me sleep at night."

Caufmann closes his eyes for a moment, willing his patience to hold firm, "Listen, Ren, I need you to be sharp out there. If you go through the motions with this android I'll see what I can do to get you a partner."

Rennin believes it would be easier not to call him sir if only

Caufmann didn't sound so much like a soldier at times. "It's not the most absorbing job." *Most of the time.*

"Particularly over the next few weeks."

"What's happening in the next few weeks?"

"Just with all the Gorai Aurelia activity in town."

Rennin snorts, "I'm amazed a faction like that has the balls to show their faces in public. Most of the people here still remember the day the GA attacked this city."

"Well they have the right to protest whatever they see fit. They're non-militant now, either way."

"It still gets stuck in my craw a little, sir."

"There is a little something you can do for me, Ren. Off the record."

Rennin arches an eyebrow, "Oh? No problem. I hope it's outside working hours."

"Are you finished?"

"No."

"I need someone killed."

Rennin's banter ceases and his face turns completely placid, "Say again? I'm not *actually* an assassin, you realise. The white coats, sure, I get that. You don't have to be a genius to know that what you guys are cooking up below shouldn't be allowed out at all. But if this is a civvie, I—"

"This isn't a human. There's some kind of android loitering around with the Gorai Aurelia activists."

"Aren't androids banned here? And why the GA? They hate them."

"Smoking is banned in the clock tower, but you do it. By sabotaging the smoke detection unit, no less."

Rennin feels a hot flush under his collar. "That's not exactly the same thing. Not even in principle. Either way, what is something like that doing near the Gorai? Wouldn't those luddites smash it?"

"I don't know, but I need it destroyed. I don't care if you take it out from the tower or walk right up and take its head off."

"From the clock tower? You mean just in case it waltzes by sometime during my shift? Get the Horizon Military."

"It's trying to break into the lab. That makes it an in-house problem in my view. If you don't want to do it, that's fine, I'll take other measures," says Caufmann in a darkly quiet way.

Rennin suppresses a shiver, "Do I want to know more?"

"No."

Rennin nods, more to himself than Caufmann, "It's a combat model, then."

"Not originally, but it is now."

"What type?"

"Didn't I tell you that you don't want to know more?"

"If I know its type it'll make it easier to take down."

"Chassis type is unknown. Possibly a Progenitor Class."

Rennin's interest is definitely piqued, "A rogue Progenitor Class? That thing must be ancient. And worth a fortune."

"To a *collector*, yes."

"You could get a small army willing to take it down just to keep its parts."

"Yes but we don't want that technology in anyone's hands but ours. I need it killed, then our men will retrieve the body and disassemble it."

"If I get a clean shot from the clock tower I'll take it out, otherwise you're on your own."

Caufmann nods, "That's good enough."

Rennin takes a breath, "So what's this android you want to *domestically* test? Is it dangerous?"

"No. The combat protocols aren't active."

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Rennin again makes the return journey to the clock tower, noticing a large steel coffin shaped box near the door.

The infamous Raddocks Horizon rain has started to fall, and Rennin's perception opens up as it always does in a downpour. His mind wanders as his vision runs across the bland grass, stretching from wall to solid wall, spiked periodically with defence weapons. The grounds outer wall has gun turrets at either side of the front gate and four others above the entrance to the Godyssey lab building itself. He's never seen them activated or used them himself.

The nostalgic upright steel bar gate is less security conscious than Rennin would like. *Why can't we just have a solid steel gate, it'd stop all those nosy bastards peering in.*

His daydreaming is interrupted when he sees a small but growing crowd of Gorai Aurelia gathering outside the gate. He knows he's not allowed to antagonise them, but he cannot suppress a venomous glare that is a mere splinter of his hatred for them. Half the dozen-strong crowd look to be in their mid-teens. They probably don't know the atrocities committed by the humanists during the war, but they are still tacitly approving them. *They should research what they have signed up with.*

Rennin doesn't like that one of Raddocks Horizon's busiest streets is barely fifty metres from the front entrance. He personally believes

the lab should have been situated well outside the city. But then again he isn't sure which came first, the lab or the city. *Then we can just shoot these pricks and plant some corn.*

Rennin stops for a moment to study the empty container outside his tower and shakes his head, wondering which eager Gorai Aurelia lackey or reporter had the privilege of snapping whatever came out of it.

He shakes his head again, this time to get the water out of his longer-than-regulation hair, even though it'll only get soaked and drip down his collar again. His black tunic uniform with fibre-weave armour underlay is mostly synthetic and therefore waterproof, but water can still dribble down between his collar and skin, and once inside has no option but run all the way down to his boots. But Rennin loves the rain, despite the grim reminder of his last tour of duty in the CryoZaiyon Wars.

He misses his black armour and the—now illegal—sniper rifle he used to carry. He was a precision shooter worthy of an android. His last mission was a solo assassination of a dignitary and financier of the Gorai Aurelia war effort. He shakes his head again, sending another spray of water outwards and continues into clock tower, refusing to think of the war any further.

Upon entering the lookout, he is greeted with the broadside of an eight or nine foot android standing just inside the door. He remains frozen in place, never having seen an android of this size before. It has grey, almost translucent skin and armour plating across its shoulders, the top of its head, elbows, and lower legs. Otherwise it looks naked. The Godyssey emblem is also etched on an armour plate just below the right shoulder blade.

Rennin feels goosebumps appearing all over him when its left hand turns upwards and gestures towards his seat. The watchman complies, attempting to sit down casually, trying to avoid thinking about Caufmann laughing at him as he watches the surveillance footage, bearing witness to Rennin's tentative steps.

He slowly turns his head to look at the android's face, such as it is. The mouth is huge, an exposed row of sharp interlocking teeth, with no lips to speak of. There is a slight bump for a nose but no eyes.

He is barely settled when the hairs on his arms stand on end again just before the monitor in front of him beeps. He leans forwards and reads:

Hello, Watchman Farrow, my name is Del.

Before his eyes the teeth retract into Del's jaw line. He doesn't want to think about what a bite attack from this colossus would do to a person. Rennin remains silent for a moment, taking a look at the android's now disturbingly human face, then focuses back to the

console in front of him.

"Hi," he says as more of a question.

How are you?

"Fine," he pauses and shrugs, wondering what to do with an eight foot android, "and how are you?"

Text continues scrolling across the screen. *45% operational. Combat protocols locked down. Body components below 50% developed. Incubation interrupted for early test.*

Great, he thinks, sitting in a room a long way away from anyone with an untested android that looks like it could snap its fingers and break him in half, "You look perfectly healthy to me."

I am not ready for combat. I was ordered to converse with you.

"About what?"

I don't know.

"The break-ball scores?"

I don't know.

"Okay…" Rennin sits quietly for a moment thinking hard about what he's supposed to do with this thing. A thought does come to him, "What were you built for?"

Combat.

A smart arse. Wonderful. "Combat where? You're too big to be a spy, so what are you?"

I am a state of the art fighting model built for any form of combat. The highest care has been taken to ensure maximum strength with minimum framework. I am twice the size and exponentially faster than any Standard.

Rennin feels a pang at the word Standard being used by an android. Standard is the name most military androids adopted for the human soldiers in their ranks. Standard meaning less than them, ordinary, "barely feasible" as one once said.

"I thought the word Standard being applied to human troops was universally condemned."

Doctor Caufmann told me to refer to all other soldiers as such.

So a regular android is even considered a Standard compared to Del, "Favourite son, huh?"

I don't know.

Rennin's attention is drawn to the front gates where the Gorai Aurelia activists have started chanting their catchy but mind numbing rubbish. Rennin doesn't even bother trying to understand their monkey babble anymore.

He looks at his sniper rifle. His Godyssey modified sniper rifle designed to project purpose-made poisoned rounds, making every injury a kill. Another of Caufmann's personal touches. Rennin wonders if this is Caufmann's version of micro managing.

The silent alarm is tripped; one of the scientists from a restricted floor is walking out the front entrance of the lab. Rennin has to let a cynical laugh escape his lips at the sheer audacity of this lunatic. He isn't even running.

Most of those juice-fiddlers in the chemical weapons division don't even know they've been implanted with a microscopic chip behind their eyes during their initial retina scans. These implants trip the alarm if they leave the safe zone, calling Rennin to action.

The sniper rifle is in his hands before a moment passes and the scope is trained on a familiar looking scientist walking at a forcibly relaxed pace towards the gate. Rennin hears Caufmann's voice resonate in the lookout, "Are you waiting for something? He's a contagion risk. Take him out."

Rennin can't place his name but trains the scope down to see the scientist has something palmed on the side nearest the watchman.

He frowns, ignoring another direct order to take him down. Moving the scope left to the gateway he sees, in the midst of the chanting locals, a suspiciously unmoving figure standing just to the side of the front gate. *A drop off?*

This is becoming stranger by the moment. No communications are allowed from the lower levels, but then again how has the scientist made it this far out to begin with? *The idiot hasn't realised he's tripped the alarm. But he's got someone here to meet him.*

"How did you organise that?" he whispers.

The scientist is only metres from the front gate and Caufmann is still nagging Rennin to take him out. He's only two steps away, and in expectation of delivery, he begins to reach out his hand.

The recipient moves to accept it, bringing his face into view. Rennin peers down the sniper scope, and taps the imaging button, taking a snapshot of the man's face, before pressing a button on the nearby console, switching on the floodlights. The entire courtyard is bathed in a stunningly bright white light, effectively halting all vision from outside the gate. Looking directly into those lights can blind you for several days.

Rennin, looking with the light, not into it, can still see perfectly. He sees the scientist jump in shock, take a backward step, tottering slightly as he realises he's been caught out. The man on the other side of the gate is now sticking his arm through, no doubt shouting at the scientist to hurry up and hand over whatever he's holding.

Recognition dawns on Rennin. "Hey it's little Jakey, you're no scientist. Why are you wearing that coat?" he says forgetting that Del is there for a moment. *Or is it Jamie? Doesn't matter now.*

The bullet Rennin fires hits the scientist square in the chest causing the body to fly backwards, almost flip over, before crumpling

to the ground in a nondescript heap.

Rennin puts the sniper rifle down after detaching the scope and looks to Del, “Pretty slick, hey?”

Efficient. I could not do better, appears on the screen.

“High praise indeed,” he says spinning the scope on his flat upturned palm.

Bear in mind that I am not yet half of my full potential.

“A last word freak too, just like your father.”

Rennin is sitting in Caufmann’s office for the third time this shift, “Was something wrong with taking him out earlier?” asks the doctor.

The watchman is sitting too smugly for Caufmann’s liking. “I did more than you expected.”

Caufmann remains still for a moment before a resigned expression crosses his face, “Oh do please enlighten me.”

Rennin smiles and places a printout in front of the doctor, “This is an image of the man that the scientist was trying to reach.”

Caufmann leans over and his gaze remains still as if burning the image into his mind, “Well done, Ren.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Fire away.”

“You said he was a contagion risk?”

“I was trying to hurry you.”

“Okay,” says Rennin, less than convinced with that answer. “What exactly was the scientist holding?”

Caufmann gazes at Rennin with a strange look that may well have been an emotion Rennin doesn’t possess himself, “If you knew that, you wouldn’t be sitting here now.”

Rennin isn’t one to be intimidated by threats, but Caufmann’s casually dismissive tone makes the watchman feel like he’s swallowed a bucket of ice, “I-I see, sir.”

“How did you find Del?”

“Well,” Rennin shifts in his seat, “he’s polite. He is a *he* isn’t he?”

Caufmann smiles, “I like that you ask. Not many would even care to. Del is a he, yes.”

“He says he’s not finished.”

“Yes, we’re working on that, but an android like that needs special attention.”

“I see. He’s too big to be an infiltrator, what is he for?”

“He’s a soldier. Plain and simple.”

Rennin nods, feigning understanding.

“Dismissed. Take the rest of the night off. Go get something to drink.”

Rennin leaves after an exaggerated bow.

William Caufmann sighs and leans back in his chair. Rennin Farrow is one of the strangest people he’s ever met. Caufmann takes a breath, increasing the stabbing pain in his chest. Nothing inside him seems to work like it should nowadays.

His eyes constantly hurt, his hands feel severely arthritic, but he knows that can’t be so. Every now and then he has a pain in his head so harsh it temporarily blinds him. His body isn’t made for the kind of treatment he’s putting it through.

He lays his right arm on the table after pulling up the sleeve to inspect what Rennin presumed was a communication gauntlet. This isn’t a gauntlet or an implant. This is as much a part of his body as anything else.

The skin at the wrist and elbow has been sliced right around, the tissue removed, exposing the artificial workings beneath. Diagnostic scans display in his glasses that act as a heads-up-display. He reads quickly, skimming over the jargon and focussing only on the necessary data:

Internal trauma.

Casing rupture, algorithm unstable.

Neural-net leak.

Multiple systems inaccessible.

Implant array: Active.

Transponder signal disruption: Active.

Caufmann stands up clenching both fists, willing himself to use the pain to keep him strong, or at the very least focussed. He looks at his desk and lands a punch directly down with his right hand.

The desk may look like polished wood but it is only an effect finish on the steel substrate. The indentation he’s made in the surface distorts his reflection, though his show of strength has cost him most of the skin on his knuckles.

Caufmann grunts looking at his warped image in the desk’s surface. He doesn’t understand how his internal problems can cause so much pain yet outward physical trauma doesn’t invoke even the slightest of reactions. “All this worth it, old boy?” he asks sighing with weariness decades old, “Doctor William Caufmann… where have you left me?”

As always, after his shift, Rennin waits the precisely eighty

excruciating seconds for the gate to cycle its locking sequence before opening the only door to any respite from his self-pitying existence.

Hope isn't something Rennin feels but there is a distinct sense of satisfaction when he sees the pub across Wells Street.

He takes a triumphant stride outside the lab's grounds into the desperate attempt at a modernised Victorian street scheme, and sets his sight on the bar. Since he couldn't have one for the road after leaving work he will now have to order two to get started. If he is unlucky enough to be served by the robot bartender it will as always refuse to supply two drinks to a lone person. But he will order two anyway.

One day it'll crack.

The robot bartender stands out severely amongst the Victorian décor. Considering how elaborate the bar's collection of period trinkets are to set the scene they're trying to create, Rennin would have thought they'd have helped the robot blend in a little. It's shiny blue protector plates contrast sharply with the interior's burgundy and cream setting.

At that point he notices that the robot isn't the only thing to stand out today. In a booth up the rear of the pub sit some fancy uniforms that Rennin doesn't see too often. The plain dark grey fatigues they wear are glossed up only by the shiny grey armour plating around the shoulders, chest, and knees.

They are members of the Godyssey owned Beta HolinMech unit. Rennin can't suppress the arching of one of his eyebrows.

Predictably, Beta HolinMech have followed the free booze. Or at least two of them have; sitting in the farthest booth from the entrance that line the rightmost wall.

The furthest of the pair has dirty blonde hair atop a gaunt face with high cheekbones. His shining blue eyes are piercing enough for Rennin to see even from across the room.

Definitely a veteran soldier, Rennin thinks.

Seen from behind, the soldier's companion seems fairly young, but from his hunched posture, the way his left hand rotates his drink round and round suggests enough for Rennin to make an educated guess. He's either bored or deep in thought, but thinking is not what soldiers are best at, so Rennin bets on the former.

He concludes this kind of downtime is not what he finds fun.

Rennin slides up the bar to sit at the far end, as close to the two soldiers as he can. The venue is half full, mostly with guards and low security clearance lab workers, many of whom are too exhausted to talk, though some are drunk out of their minds. They seem to be perpetually slurring louder, as if that will help clarify whatever they're attempting to communicate.

He can see the two soldiers sitting and talking in the wall mirror behind the bar. Upon focussing he begins to filter out the other patrons, slowly fading their voices away and zeroing in on the Betas. "…not the best I-…"

"…-ne, you… we can…"

Rennin focuses almost to the point of overtly glaring.

"…we shouldn't," says bright eyes.

"This coming-…m you?" says the dark haired other.

Rennin concentrates harder until all he can see is the reflection of the two soldiers, and everything else has blurred out into an indistinct haze. Bright eyes peps up, "Listen, Drake, you know we're here to get the mark and only the mark. Isfeohrad is primary, Arbiter is secondary."

Drake shrugs, "I don't know about this. Only one team to comb an entire megacity, for some android that's been here for months? Why would finding Arbiter be secondary? He was supposed to be the pinnacle of the universe or whatever Caufmann said."

So, Caufmann has called in the big guns. Beta HolinMechs are Special Forces. They and the SAS have a fierce rivalry. Rennin concedes that they're not here for the free booze after all.

"That doesn't make sense, but if he was alive, we'd know by now. We're looking for a synthetic cadaver, that's all," says bright eyes.

"Oh great, should be easy. It's not like we can ask if anyone's seen him."

Bright eyes rolls his baby blues. "This is why I didn't want to tell you, I knew you'd act like this."

"I wish you could see your face. Mister '*I was given a solo mission how awesome am I*'," says Drake.

"It's necessary to make sure he can't be reactivated. Either way it's a *secondary* objective."

"Can't be reactivated? Now you have to kill him? And why are we still talking about this? In *public*."

"Well he's supposed to still be dead. And the mission isn't classified. *And* we're Godyssey, we own everything. All these people here?" Bright eyes says with the sweep of his hand, "Who are they going to tell? We are the authorities."

Drake fixes bright eyes with a sceptical stare. "Where exactly did you get this information?"

"Intel."

Drake bursts out laughing, almost into a mad cackle. "Suddenly it makes so much sense. Why did they pick the name 'Arbiter' as his codename?"

"His call sign is 'Achilles', Arbiter is—"

"CAN I HELP YOU, SIR?" says a deafening electronic voice.

Rennin almost jumps out of his skin, while nearly falling off his barstool. For a moment he stares at the featureless metal face staring at him with two yellow eyes in utter bewilderment.

His hearing had been so concentrated it felt like the thing had yelled right in his ear. Rennin checks the reflection but the soldiers are still chatting away. He looks back at the bartender, “A pint.”

“Pale or black?”

“Once you go black,” he winks at the robot that completely misses the reference. Rennin sighs, “Porter.”

The robot trundles off to fetch his order. Rennin sometimes forgets of the gulf between robots and androids. An android still wouldn’t find his joke funny, but it would understand that he’d made it.

◆◆◆

In a lower level of the Godyssey lab, two technicians in full hazmat gear work with various toxins, mixing them according to instructions displayed on a screen in the furthest wall.

From the monitoring room, Caufmann stands with his two most senior researchers Mepida Rethrin and Jellan Roths. Rethrin is in her mid-thirties, her long brown hair tied in a tight bun with bright blue eyes. Caufmann thinks she looks quite Swedish, and wonders what he’d think of her if he still had a working reproductive system.

Roths is older by a decade at least, with a very regal bearing and powerful presence that shows no sign of diminishing with age. Her shoulder length blonde hair has greyed mildly, but her piercing grey-green eyes demand full attention.

Roths sighs in frustration, “One of us should be in there with them.”

Caufmann is standing closest to the glass. He turns to regard first Roths, then Rethrin through his reflective red lens glasses.

“This experiment is dangerous. Too dangerous for us to risk making a mistake. I need you two alive, these lab techs need training, and are a dime a dozen.” He turns back to watch the experiment.

Rethrin scoffs, “You don’t just find *willing* lab techs to work ridiculous hours and be basically imprisoned until our projects are complete.”

“For the right price, most come running,” he says.

“Exactly how many need die? Farrow shot another one this evening,” says Roths angrily.

“He was a traitor.”

Rethrin’s face turns to disbelief, “Traitor? This is a company, not

a country and therefore possesses no sovereignty. He worked here with you for years."

"Do you two even remember his name?"

Roths' expression is so sour Caufmann can feel his throat tighten. "His name was James."

Caufmann nods. "And *James* was handing a memory card to the Gorai Aurelia. The information on it was everything we *don't* want the public to see."

Roths looks to the vague reflection of Caufmann's face in the glass, "Haven't you ever thought that what we're doing here is wrong?"

Caufmann swings around to face them both. Being nearly a head taller than both of them and possessing a rather imposing frame they both lean back ever so slightly, "Do you really believe I *like* my job?"

"Rennin Farrow likes his. That butcher is on our payroll. *That,* I find disturbing," says Roths.

"I suppose you're here because you're not allowed to leave?"

Roths smiles, "Your intuition never fails you."

"Your sarcasm must help you sleep at night."

"How do you sleep at night?"

"Haven't you heard the rumours? I don't."

An alarm blares inside the containment chamber drawing the immediate attention of all three scientists.

One of the lab technicians has torn his suit, and in panic has dropped a vial of transparent purple liquid. The spilled fluid is quickly turning to vapour.

The tech is attempting to hold the rip closed with both hands, to maintain the positive air pressure inside the hazmat suit.

His workmate is moving towards the door to the decontamination chamber but Caufmann is quicker; he taps his forearm terminal, locking down the laboratory. The lab tech is scrabbling at the keypad with increasing panic while Caufmann types in a fourteen-digit command, and executes it.

The containment chamber instantly turns impossibly bright. Caufmann watches the ten-second incineration, but Rethrin and Roths avert their gaze.

Once the bright light fades there is very little left inside the chamber apart from the charred partial remains of the technicians and badly burned benches. But no remnants of any toxins are present.

Roths and Rethrin are stunned beyond speech. Caufmann slowly turns to face them but his shoulders are hunched this time and there is no pride in his stance, "I would do that to you if I had to and I'd expect the same for myself," he pauses and takes a breath. "Now get me some more techs."

◆◆◆

Caufmann stalks up the hallway towards his office, barely looking up from the floor. Gossip of Rennin Farrow's most recent shooting and Caufmann's own forced cremation of two more technicians has spread like a virus already.

The other workers are not keen to get in his way but Caufmann could walk straight into someone and not even notice at this point. He has closed down the part of his brain that keeps up with what's happening outside his head. He is on autopilot all the way back to his office and nothing short of God will stop him.

The door to his office flies up, he storms inside and slaps a button on his forearm terminal, slamming the door and locking it.

The lights come on brightly.

"Dim!" Caufmann screams and the lights lower to a soft glow, throwing shadows all over the room.

There's not much clutter in his office apart from the two chairs in front of his desk, the desk itself, and his throne-like black chair. He sits in it for barely twenty minutes per day and even that time is spent mostly arguing with Rennin.

The doctor takes a shaky step forwards and feels the world leave his feet for a moment. He steadies himself by taking a breath but the pain spikes in his chest again and he stumbles back against the door with a metallic thud.

He takes his glasses off, dropping them on the floor. His bright green eyes glow against the dim light. "Three dead in one day…" he raises his hands to his face pressing his fingers against his eyes as if to hold them closed. "James Wolcott, shot. Stephen Kale and Francis Wales burned alive…" he can barely say that above a whisper.

His breaths become shorter and shorter, "Fuck!" he shouts kicking his heel against the door. He takes his hands away from his face and opens his eyes. They glow viciously against his dark sockets, looking even further recessed than they did a moment ago.

Caufmann goes over to his desk and sinks into his chair's upholstery finding no comfort. After a moment's respite from the world, he slaps the intercom button on his desk. The monotone voice of his assistant is heard almost instantly, "Yes, Doctor Caufmann?"

"I want Professor Danard Nordoth and Doctor Elsie Straker thawed from the stasis section immediately."

"Chairman Van Gower has revoked all authority to remove any of the CryoGen Research Team until further notice."

Caufmann's eyes flare up throwing a glare across his desk's faux wood finish, "Why is that?" he asks harshly.

The assistant pauses, "He doesn't tell me anything, sir, I'm sorry,

it's not—"

He interrupts her, "Find out!"

"But—"

"Bah!" he yells and his veins pulse, "I'll call him," he slaps the intercom button on his desk, hanging up.

He leans back for a moment and takes a breath to calm himself down. His angry heartbeat can be seen pulsing beneath his lab shirt. He almost leaps out of his throne and retrieves his glasses from the floor. He puts them on to conceal his unusual eyes then returns to his seat at a slow and precise walk.

Once confident he has regained his composure, he opens a channel with the Iyatoya lunar base to his employer and CEO of Godyssey: Dacaster Van Gower.

After a few attempts at establishing a connection Van Gower's hideous secretary appears on his screen. Del looks like a Vogue model by comparison.

Does Vogue even exist anymore?

"Yes, Doctor Caufmann?" she asks in that raspy voice that Caufmann would like to tear out with a rusted pair of pliers.

"Put me through to Van Gower," he says barely moving his lips. The way he looks on the screen at her end is like a hungry reanimated corpse.

"CEO Van Gower is not available at this time," she says not the least bit intimidated.

"You talk to him and tell him I'm on my way up there to see him."

"One moment," she says and his screen goes blank for half a minute before she reappears, "He will speak with you now."

Caufmann doesn't answer and clenches his jaw as an image of his employer flickers onto the screen.

Van Gower's impossibly symmetrical face smiles blandly, "Doctor Caufmann," as if he's surprised, "What can I do for you?"

"I need some information from Professor Nordoth and Doctor Straker, but apparently you've given an order to deny anyone from thawing the CryoGen team."

"Once they are thawed it will be very time consuming to re-freeze them."

"I don't understand why having them frozen in stasis is necessary at all. Their expertise would be invaluable to me."

"The CryoGen team designed the android system as a means of an alternative way of life rather than dying of cancer or disease. They did *not* develop it for military application and since they founded Godyssey they have the right to close down everything we've done. But as acting CEO I have decided they will remain in stasis," he says

casually.

Caufmann clenches his jaw so tightly he can hear his own teeth grinding together, “They are frozen on the lower level, I’ll thaw them myself if I have to.”

“I can remotely kill them from here before the defrosting process is complete if I detect that you have.”

“I need information to complete Del’s programming errors.”

“Use a human template. We have dozens of Instinctual Clusters in storage with no bodies; any of them would work perfectly.”

“Instinctual Clusters are not required, I am not using a HolinMech system for this android.”

Van Gower’s eyes widen in near panic, “Well you are *not* using a CryoZaiyon system!” he says with his voice rising almost shrilly.

Caufmann mentally struggles to suppress a smile, “I’m using a different system altogether.”

Van Gower’s face turns to a frown, “You’re a molecular biologist, what are you doing building androids?”

“With this android the two go hand in hand.”

“What is it for?”

Caufmann hesitates. “It is a combat model.”

“Combat models are illegal.”

“We *use* them for every special forces mission! How did that happen after the universal condemnation of military grade androids? The entire solar system was strip mined for resources to fight a ludicrous war that we haven’t recovered from.”

“Twelve. We keep twelve for those missions. Hardly an army.”

“The *only* twelve in the world. Quite a monopoly.”

“Doctor Caufmann, listen to me very carefully. We are the biggest corporation of bioengineering in the solar system and as such have certain privileges normally denied to others. We cure cancer, *we* develop organic prosthetics, *we* are the future!” he says in a commanding tone. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten who it is you work for, despite your obvious talents.”

“I build what I want. My contract says as long as I make my professional requirements my pet projects aren’t your concern if they’re not a direct threat to the company. Either way, Del is a protector of this installation and the project was approved by the board unanimously who make up fifty-one percent of the total.”

“I was not told!”

“In a unanimous vote, you are not required to be informed.”

Van Gower says nothing but is obviously fuming.

“They are most interested in how this project turns out as they may want one for their own uses. In defence, of course.”

“I can make sure that project is scrapped, doctor.”

Caufmann tilts his head, “I build everything you ask me to, from bio warfare to vaccines to genetic bombs and all I want is to build *one* android for my own experiment. Is that really so much to ask?”

“You just said that you build what you want, regardless.”

Caufmann makes a dismissive gesture, “With the board’s permission. I have work to get back to, it’s been an honour as always,” he says, and disconnects. He sits back alone in the silence and rocks lightly in his throne.

“I’ll thaw Nordoth and Straker, somehow,” he tells himself.

◆◆◆

Rennin Farrow arrives home just after three o’clock in the morning to his upper working class apartment block. The building is also owned by Godyssey Company, and paid for by Godyssey employees in some kind of magical fiscal merry-go-round. It’s not pretty but the rent is cheap for their employees.

The interior is a dim grey and so are the bench tops, the cooking appliances, the bed sheets and the carpet. The lounge, living room, and kitchen are all the same room. The only floor space that isn’t covered by carpet is the kitchenette.

Rennin believes the blandness and lack of colour scheme is to aid the killing of imagination in Godyssey’s employees. The only other room is a bathroom with shower barely big enough to hold a child, let alone an ex-CryoZaiyon Standard trooper.

Then again, the walls are never plain for Rennin. He can still see the memories of the war on those seemingly blank surfaces like an olden day cinema screen. He can still see the warships flamed off Saturn’s moon, Titan, shot down by a hyper-transit rail gun from Neptune. On the opposite wall, he can see the troopers torn up by armed satellites off the frontline of Suva.

Rennin sits on his meagre couch and lies back, looking at the ceiling. On that bland surface, so devoid of detail, it seems to move before his eyes. It appears to stretch away from him then loom downward towards him.

For some reason the ceiling always plays the same hallucinatory memory; the terrible end to the Jupiter Sieges. Rennin was stationed on Io with a small garrison, protecting the last remaining android foundry. The Gorai Aurelia had set up a stronghold on Europa. As the two moons approached on an abnormally close orbit path, Rennin remembers Europa rising in the sky, seemingly close enough to throw a stone at.

The two moons’ respective armies waited until the celestial bodies

were at the closest possible proximity, and then they both opened fire. Unfathomable beams of energy passed between them, propelled by vast engines of war, as Europa and Io began to reap devastation upon one another. Cannon emplacements the size of small mountains erupted with tremendous energy across the void in a cacophony that Rennin can still feel stealing his breath. The horror he felt still hammers the air from his lungs as he remembers the crash of enemy fire against the shields.

It was all a matter of which side would eventually wear down the other's defences, or get a direct hit on a critical element of the war machine. Sometimes Io's shields would fail and they'd sustain the barrage underground, praying for anything to make it stop. Sometimes the GA shields would be broken, and ravenous, voracious madness would grip the troops like they were rabid animals. They'd scream and snarl as they blasted Europa, fantasizing about wiping them from the solar system. When both side's shields failed he isn't even sure who was operating the guns.

It was pure chaos.

His ears used to ring after a bombardment cycle, which occurred roughly twice every seven or eight days. Io orbits Jupiter at almost twice the speed of Europa so it was only a matter of a few short days to prepare for the next time they were in range of each other.

Rennin had never seen weaponry like that. Sometimes he still isn't sure if it was real. It was a literal war between worlds. Every time Europa rose on Io's horizon was like a needle piercing Rennin's soul.

Chaos.

Looking down to the final grey wall in front of him, he can see Commander Forgal Lauros brandishing a flaming green sword, cutting a swath through the ground troops leaving hacked limbs, heads and cleaved guns in his wake.

Despite the sheer brilliance of seeing it first hand, Rennin was shaking at the time. The concussive shock from nearby orbital shots temporarily left him trembling.

Rennin will never forget the eyes of Lauros. In the flaming ruin of a Gorai Aurelia base he remembers Lauros standing with shattered pauldrons, cracked armour, many cuts and even a few bullet holes in his limbs. Yet for all his wounds, he was still standing in the wreckage and fire waiting for his troops to catch up. When Rennin's company met up with the leader, he wasn't sure but he thought Forgal Lauros looked at him with his shining eyes. The shadow over his face made his eyes the only visible feature and the green in them looked reptilian. Those eyes had seen Hell, Rennin had no doubt of that.

What Rennin realised, at that moment in the embers falling like snow, is that those CryoZaiyons had no way to block all those battles

away like a human can. Rennin himself never mustered the kind of cowardice to hide his pain behind a wall of repression. It was then that he found it easier to relate to a machine than his own kind. Because Rennin Farrow has never felt human at all.

2.
Line in the Sand

The blinding lights illuminate the yard, immediately followed by a sniper round tearing through the skull of another escapee from the lower level. Rennin hasn't received a kill order from Caufmann yet, but it was an escapee, and there's only one way to deal with them.

Del was returned to the lower levels for diagnostics a fortnight ago, and in that short period this is the third attempted breakout. Rennin is back in his seat even before the scientist's body stops moving.

He wipes his eyes, feeling sleep accumulating and slaps his hand against his desk, angry with his aging body. He could once go for days without sleep during his time in the service.

Despite the obvious tediousness of his current job, Rennin knows he shouldn't be so hard on himself. But sometimes when he really thinks about it, he feels like he is still in service. Something about Caufmann really makes him uncomfortable.

What kind of Head of Research threatens his staff with pummelling?

Rennin could take on someone twice his size, but Caufmann still scares him stiff sometimes.

Either he's getting scarier, or I'm getting soft.

Rennin looks to his computer terminal and blinks away another wave of weariness. His mind reviews the two Beta HolinMech's conversation in the bar, recalling the name of their primary target. He opens up the Godyssey Co. system and types '*Arbiter*' into the search bar.

Only one match is found, and it is regarding a class of computer system made nearly a hundred and forty years ago. Rennin rolls his eyes and thinks to the other thing they mentioned.

"Iz-fee-or-ad…" he says to himself, sounding it out to decipher the spelling, but after a moment's pause he shakes his head. "Fuck it," and puts the computer in standby.

What kind of name is that anyway?

He is about to stand up to leave when an idea occurs to him. He reopens the search engine. He types in: '*Progenitor-class*'.

The search comes up with several matches for some experiments. The first two links go to an error screen, indicating the page has been removed. The third links to a single line and a handful of references. The line reads: '*Progenitor-class artificial human system designed in 2276 by university students in West Germany, that failed five years after its first experiment.*' Rennin looks at the referral links that are all related to the

experiment of that year:

Primus.

Professor Danard Nordoth.

Doctor Elsie Straker.

Doctor Timothy Fowl.

Doctor Warwick Balkan.

Forgal Lauros.

Saifer Veidan.

Rennin raises his eyebrows. *Lauros and Veidan back in 2276?*

This doesn't sit well at all with him. But then again it could be a related article so he selects to view Forgal Lauros with Saifer Veidan and the Primus links on individual tabs.

Forgal Lauros' article is restricted to the basic security level, well within Rennin's Godyssey clearance. The image of Lauros doesn't look anything like the way Rennin remembers him on the battlefield in Suva. Lauros is one of the most famous androids ever to exist. Though in this picture, not only are his eyes most certainly human, his stature and build are not a soldier's.

He is dressed in civilian clothes and smiling at someone out of frame. Rennin can see from the slightly unclear shot that the picture was taken at some distance. He scans down to the article: *'Forgal Ademar Lilith Lauros. Primus volunteer. He is the only known survivor constructed using the Arbiter-class chassis system, the crudest of the transmogrification conversions.*

Activated in 2292, Lauros and his unit were not field tested until the Invasion of China, several months before the war broke out.

The unit itself showed particular aptitude in strength related tasks and excelled beyond all expectations in hand-to-hand combat. During the campaign in China, Lauros was part of a feint to draw attention away from the real assault team. He was sent in with another that was disabled shortly after insertion. He nearly subdued the base on his own.

Forgal Lauros was later recalibrated and given the rank of commander. Along with Lieutenant Saifer Veidan, the pair of them lead the CryoZaiyons across dozens of battle zones. They were also the leaders of the strike team that destroyed Shatterpoint, the Gorai Aurelian capital.

The only real blemish on Forgal Lauros was when he was sent to Ireland where he was accused of murder, by torture. Evidence was purely circumstantial, and only supported by hearsay.'

The remainder of the article outlines his common-knowledge campaigns during the war. Rennin looks back to the where it says he was a Primus volunteer and an Arbiter-class system. So Drake's soldier buddy, Bright Eyes, is here to kill Forgal Lauros.

Rennin remembers the pile of corpses around Commander Lauros on the beachhead and bursts out laughing. *Yeah, good luck, guys*. Hard

to kill someone who's already dead, and if he is still alive no human will be able to take him out.

Rennin frowns suddenly and rereads 'volunteer' and his middle names. He wonders why an android would have middle names. And why they call him a volunteer. Rennin has heard the CryoZaiyon android was constructed using human donors, but he'd always assumed it was Gorai Aurelia propaganda. With Rennin's ease at accessing this information Godyssey obviously don't care to hide it.

Looking at the picture of Forgal Lauros smiling Rennin can't quite be sure what he's looking at. Transmogrification could mean human to android, or simply changing an android into a different type of android.

Androids wouldn't need to volunteer, surely.

He opens the Saifer Veidan page but is confronted by a high level restriction on any further information. He allows himself to be diverted onto details about Primus:

'Primus was a recruiting program initiated when CryoGen Industries was fully assimilated into Godyssey Co. after the Embryon Protocol fallout. Primus acquired candidates by headhunting and flagging those exhibiting talents outside normal human capability.

'Primus was disbanded just prior to the CryoZaiyon War, after a source leaked details pertaining to uncooperative 'volunteers' being forcibly drafted and put into service.'

Rennin doesn't find much help with that article. Most of it didn't make any sense to him and only raised more questions. He remembers CryoGen Industries, but the Embryon Protocol isn't ringing any bells.

He wonders how someone would become 'flagged' for exhibiting talents. A further search turns up nothing, leading Rennin to conclude the information is useless without a higher level of clearance to define these things. Typing them into the search bar turns up nothing. So much of the androids' history is either locked away for security measures, missing, or misreported.

Rennin remembers the GA banners about android origins and whether or not they could simply be reprogrammed to suit the purposes of whoever controlled them. He laughs to himself; he felt the same way about them once. That was before he saw them for himself.

The watchman knows there is a fundamental disparity between the typical idea of an android and the CryoZaiyons, therefore programming or re-programming is vastly different. The word eludes him momentarily but comes to him like a light shining in the dark.

Cybrid.

He has always believed that the genius of macro-cybrid technology is that the android is no longer a simple machine at base level. Cybrids are true synthetic life forms whereas androids are just

an artificial parody of life. Godyssey were open enough publicly with this information on the difference between them. Yet they were all always referred to as androids. Rennin believes this is because the general populace are incapable of coping with more than one concept at a time.

This living element is what prompted some to speculate that cybrids aren't programmed on a computer, but their drives and algorithms are grown into them. However, that was disproved due to cybrids being able to learn. If they couldn't be rewritten then they couldn't learn. Rennin remembers the phrase, *if you can write, you can rewrite*. Of the many marvels of the CryoZaiyons, one of the least interesting—to Rennin—are the programming methods.

Although now that he thinks of it, Godyssey weren't entirely open with divulging information of the cybrids being a technical life form. Despite them being artificially constructed, they fall into a category of living things which should make them protected from slavery. Since cybrids, like androids, don't get paid for their servitude there was a concern for their wellbeing.

Can't have been human. Who takes a human to turn it into an android just to turn it back into a living thing?

Godyssey assured the world that they were, and still are, only constructs. But Rennin isn't so sure. If they were simple robots they could be reprogrammed. But what he never could figure out is how they were ever programmed to begin with. He's sure the CryoZaiyons weren't fully alive, but they certainly weren't completely inanimate. Telling anything organic what to do is done with training, not a series of binary commands. At least as far as he knows.

And you're not exactly a pillar of education, sweetheart.

Coldcell technology fuelled the dead race of CryoZaiyons and is what gave them all their power. That power cell technology alone was a wondrous achievement by the Germans well over a century ago. It's what made CryoGen Industries famous, as well as powering their creations. It also drew the attention of the all-assimilating Godyssey Corporation.

Perhaps it was the mix of the two elements—the living and the dead—that led to a strange hysteria surrounding the apparent androids. A new phobia spread across the world like a plague before the turn of the twenty-fourth century.

In the twenty-first century, it didn't exist. By the twenty-second century it affected hundreds of thousands. The number is paltry compared to the numbers lost during the Black Death. However, when the Prime Minister or President of a country is almost incontinently sobbing, in the grip of untold fear, behind a desk on Intersolar Television upon meeting an android, it makes an impact. Rennin

remembers the footage fondly. There is something about someone's exposed weakness and humiliation that truly satisfies him.

The people it affects still remain totally random. Some people react instantly; others take a lot of time. Regardless of when it manifests, the result is crippling. *Amusing*, thinks Rennin, but crippling.

Four months pass. Not one single suspicious incident has been reported, and with each week that no one does something suspicious causes Rennin to become even more suspicious. *Suspicious of their lack of suspiciousness.* He shakes his head snapping himself from his boredom momentarily.

It's now only a week before a scheduled Gorai Aurelia rally. Periodically the humanist fanatics get together on a large scale and parade around the streets spruiking their newest and most annoyingly catchy jingle.

Typically they just protest against Godyssey. Rennin can't deny that the company is just as sinister as they believe. *But those bastards aren't saints*.

They may preach peacefully now but twenty years ago they were a fully armed, military juggernaut hellbent on wiping the world clean of androids. Crunching the numbers by themselves, for every android the GA took down they also killed approximately two-dozen Standard troops and forty civilians. In some of the battles the civilian death toll versus military losses went up to over one hundred non-combatants to one soldier. That was just the battles, though, not the massacres between them.

Rennin knows the Gorai Aurelia were desperate to turn the tide against the androids by winning over the public. But when you start a war by detonating a nuclear weapon over a civilian city, it's hard to gain support. They said they were framed, of course, but Rennin bitterly disagrees.

Hiroshima was the first city to be struck by atomic arms, and like Rennin's home of Melbourne it was also a civilian city. Rennin used to believe that it was the right decision to destroy it to end the Second World War. Until he saw his own city aflame. Hundreds of thousands killed in one single flash. The scorched remains of his family burned into his mind as clearly as what he sees before him now.

It's easy to disconnect from something that you haven't the ability to fathom. Rennin can never forgive that atrocity. And since then he can no longer excuse the mass murder of the Japanese.

Hiroshima and Melbourne are in different categories though. Many have argued this over the years since it happened. Hiroshima was to end a war. *So they say.* Melbourne was the beginning of one. Some said it was done in an attempt to end a war before it began, a pre-emptive strike. The result is the same to Rennin. It's all just weak people attempting to justify mass murder.

As far as Rennin's concerned, the GA began the war they were apparently trying to prevent by blockading Melbourne in the first place. They put the Skyhook over the city. The very Skyhook that fell from low orbit and detonated at precisely the right altitude for maximum damage.

The biggest affront to Rennin is that they now pretend that it never happened. No one talks about it anymore. And the Gorai Aurelia are even lauded for their efforts in exposing company corruption. But Rennin sees them for what they are. Butchers. Murderers.

This line of thought is doing absolutely nothing for his hangover. Rennin is in his tower overlooking the most mind-numbing part of his job: the logging of inbound and outbound cargo. He believes that this mundane part of his job, coupled with his marriage to solitude, is what is driving him mad.

Rennin needs to scan the inbound crates whilst making sure the outgoing ones will get to their assigned addresses. Ten containers of flu vaccine have gone out this morning, and more are scheduled for the next few days before all shipments are cut off.

He sighs and checks the screen for the displayed details of the current solid metal crate outside the gates. "So… we have five hundred hypodermic syringes, five crates of *assorted* test tubes and beakers, half a tonne of *synthetic* Thermosteel plasma—since *real* Thermosteel is just so bourgeois—and a partridge in a pear tree," he mutters pressing the green button.

The gates open allowing the delivery to be placed in the centre of the courtyard. The truck backs out the gate after setting it down and Rennin presses another sequence of buttons.

After a moment, barriers spring up around the crate, holding it in place. Then the ground lowers, and continues to lower for fifty metres to the laboratory stock bay to be divided up

Upon the plate returning to ground level, micro sprinklers spring out of the ground, spraying a thick ectoplasmic substance over the broken edges of grass, instantly sealing over with new flora. You'd never know there was an elevator plate there.

Rennin shakes his head at how ridiculously and unnecessarily elaborate everything at the lab is. The courtyard is open and can be seen from any overhead satellite, or helicopter, that passes by.

"What is the point of spraying that shit to make it invisible?"

Rennin shakes his head.

Working alone is taking its toll on him. No matter how much he doesn't want to admit it, he misses Wanker.

The buzzer on the console beeps and he looks out to see another truck has pulled up. This one is nondescript, stripped of any identifying symbols or marks. He presses the button to receive, "Yes?"

"Organics delivery," responds a guttural voice.

"What kind?"

"Open the gate, this delivery is urgent."

Rennin is not in the mood for any lip. "You do not order me to do anything. Clearance code, now."

"There is no clearance code, this order is for Doctor Caufmann, it's degradable organic material."

"Hold, please, your vagueness," says Rennin disconnecting the line and calling Caufmann's personal line. "Doctor Caufmann, there's an *urgent* delivery of organic material."

"From where?" comes Caufmann's voice, far more strained than usual.

"They didn't say and they didn't provide a clearance code."

"Deny it."

"They said it was for you, sir, are you sure?"

"My only organic material order was shot down at the docks by the Portmaster, whatever is at the gates is not mine," Caufmann disconnects.

Rennin opens the channel with the delivery, "Are you there, dear?"

There's a slight pause. "I hear you."

"Venture forth and fornicate."

There was a breath heard drawing on the other end for a rebuke but Rennin cuts the line off smiling like the Cheshire cat.

The truck isn't showing any signs of reversing. Its driver is attempting to re-establish communication with Rennin. Too bad he's ignoring the flashing console. Rennin feels distinctly uneasy about this, he can't settle the strange feeling in his stomach, much less the restlessness that is overwhelming him. *I hate this feeling.*

He has the urge to walk down the tower stairs, step outside the gate, pull the driver out of the car and bash him until his face is a bloodied ruin, smeared all over the pavement. His heart rate picks up and he starts feeling lighter and lighter by the moment as adrenaline floods his system.

His eyes sink back and widen, his jaw clenches and his veins start pulsing and all he can hear apart from the console beeping is his heart pounding like a bass drum. Rennin looks to his sniper rifle. *Not yet…*

Rennin opens a channel to Caufmann again, "Sir, the truck isn't

moving." The response is simple, he is ordered to take it out.

The watchman activates the courtyard turret systems and sends a message across the lab PA system telling all staff to remain indoors. A further warning is issued onto the street, sirens atop the guns themselves light up sending pedestrians into a panic as they try to get well away from the gates.

The two turrets on the outer wall target the truck's cab and open fire without any further warning to the driver. Protocol dictates quite clearly that a blatant warning be given to anyone trespassing that they will be fired upon if they don't comply.

The cab is torn apart in a single volley, tearing the driver and the passenger to pieces.

Rennin is down the stairs and out of the tower in record time with his sidearm in hand. It is a modified GX-03 HolinMech precision pistol that he's renamed '*Killjoy*'. Killjoy has been customised specifically so the recoil won't shatter his bones upon firing, since the gun was designed for an android wielder.

He opens the service grate in the left gate so he can slip into the street. Pedestrians are starting to gather, a seething crowd desperate to see what has happened. Rennin scans the group and can see many more cameras than he'd like.

The police are already arriving, making a perimeter around the wreckage of the truck. He really admires the accuracy of the gun systems, they didn't puncture any fuel cells behind the cab but both the people in it are absolutely ruined beyond recognition.

Rennin opens an audio channel to the lower level delivery area, "Get up here with tow cables to bring this thing inside."

"Is it safe?" answers a humourless female voice.

"Just get up here. If it's not safe, you go back down. If it *is* safe, you take the truck down. Same as every other time, I know it's hard to keep up with a method that never changes."

Rennin takes a featureless rectangle box off his belt, and places it on the shipping container at the rear of the trailer and switches it on. A holographic display lights up as it begins its probe.

The scanner takes a few moments, before returning a verdict; the container is empty. Rennin doesn't like that at all. He opens a channel to Caufmann.

"Sir? There's nothing in it, but I don't think we should bring it inside."

"Bring it in."

"But this could be the intention," insists Rennin, a rush of suffocating paranoia enveloping him. His scanner can only pick up organic or inorganic material, not anything microscopic like a pathogen.

“I want to examine it myself. Out,” says Caufmann, severing the communication.

Resigned, he re-holsters his sidearm and looks to the courtyard. A trio of delivery level crew are already waiting, tow cables already anchored to the elevator plate’s built in winches. These people think of everything. He gestures for them to stay where they are.

Despite Rennin’s protests, the delivery levellers hauled the remainder of the truck and it’s container inside the compound. A portable Hazmat containment chamber of plastic now encases the ruined vehicle.

It’s a simple mobile design in relation to the lab’s resources but reliable nonetheless. Caufmann has been in there for nearly an hour with a circle cutter saw. He makes a four-inch incision along the side of the container.

Caufmann is wearing a full bio-suit. He sees it as a hindrance, rather than a help since the doctor can’t be infected by anything in the known world, but it wouldn’t do to let anyone know such a thing. Appearances must be kept.

A large gasp of air is drawn into the container.

So, vacuum sealed. Interesting.

Caufmann looks to his left but the scanner attached to the side remains blank. No *known* pathogens. Then again the scanner will only issue an alert to something hazardous. Caufmann puts the saw down, thinking hard.

The only thing inside the container now is air. He pulls his head cover off, and frowns at the container. *What the hell is going on?*

A thought does dawn on him. Whoever it is now knows how to get something undetectable inside the lab complex. This is probably just a test. *Perhaps Rennin was right.*

Caufmann steps out of the containment chamber still completely lost in thought, unaware of Jellan Roths’ approach and attempt at communication. Caufmann looks over in time to catch the last piece of whatever drivel she’s speaking, “—you think you’re doing? There could be anything in there and it could be loose now.”

“There’s nothing in there.”

Roths grits her teeth, “You think you know everything? Two men dead hauling nothing?”

Caufmann turns to her, so the soulless red lenses of his glasses reflect her face.

“I am in charge of this city’s welfare for a reason. September 17

will be the last vaccination shipment. Issue a citywide order that all schools will close after the Gorai Aurelia rally on the 23rd until further notice."

"Why?"

"In April this year an infiltrator Progenitor-class android entered this city. Since then, our best attempts at apprehending it have been useless and inefficient. It's obviously trying to get into the lab. So next time, let it."

"What? Have you lost your mind?"

"I said allow it."

"Why?"

"When it arrives, and it will, stay in the dormitory sector, it's the only fully armoured place apart from the test labs," he instructs, moving past her.

Roths grabs his arm, "What are you going to do?"

Caufmann completely ignores her and his momentum, though slow, tears his arm from her grasp as if his weight is solid stone.

◆◆◆

Rennin is at home just after midnight watching the Horizon News. Always the same garbage every night, he doesn't even know why he lets himself vegetate to it.

Because you're shit at everything else.

"Oh well fuck you."

Drawing, writing, singing, dancing, washing the dishes—

"Fuck you."

No fuck you.

"Fuck *you!"*

Rennin turns the volume up.

His usual choice at this time of night would be a cult classic show: Black Colours, a comedy about a vampire, a zombie, a warlock, a crack head and a clone all living together under one roof getting themselves into all kinds of ridiculous situations.

In one episode they got drafted into the CryoZaiyon Wars. Rennin didn't really get the themes generally but the characters really rip into each other, so it keeps him amused. But he's seen the series hundreds of times.

Tonight, he is irretrievably drawn into the late night news report repeat from prime time and the striking blue-eyed, dark-haired news anchor, '*There seems to be a growing number of back problems in the city and they've been becoming ever more widespread as the months have progressed.*

Speculation is mounting that there is a virus of the nervous system loose in the city. Some believe it to have originated at the Godyssey Laboratory in Centre-city District but Doctor William Caufmann has issued a statement, again denying viral research being conducted.

We go now to Godyssey spokesman Michael Gainsford who has agreed to speak with us.'

She turns to her left, and a hologram of a middle aged devil-may-care character comes into view, '*Mister Gainsford, thank you for speaking with us tonight.'*

'It's a pleasure.'

'The city is quite astir about the truck that was destroyed outside the Godyssey lab earlier today.'

Gainsford nods, *'We are regretful about that outcome, however hazardous cargo shipments are often shot down at the docks as a preventative measure, unfortunately this one managed to slip past that net and had to be destroyed in-city. It is an unfortunate incident. The laboratory is a prime target for terrorists.'*

'Several months ago there was a small Gorai Aurelia group protesting at the front of the laboratory, when someone opened fire on someone who appeared to be a scientist in the courtyard,' says the presenter.

'How we handle our staff is our own affair. All documentation is in order, and the technician *in question was fully aware of the risk posed by trying to break quarantine. We will not tolerate anyone putting the general public at risk,"* says Gainsford calmly.

"Oh well played!" says Rennin clapping at the TV.

'Yes, Mister Gainsford, but today the guard from the watchtower who is in question about the shooting was also on scene at the truck moments after it was hit. Would this man be Rennin Farrow?'

Gainsford pauses a moment, *'Yes.'*

'The same Rennin Farrow on duty during the alleged shooting?'

'Yes.'

'We have requested an audience with him to ask what happened but he has refused, and since no legal action was taken we've been desperately attempting to gain an interview with him. We were hoping to hear from him before we went to air.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Has he given a statement to you, to issue to us?'

'No he hasn't commented on it at all.'

Rennin scoffs.

The anchor takes a breath after a slight pause. She genuinely seems conflicted about what she's about to say, rather than pausing for dramatic effect.

'We were informed earlier today that Doctor Caufmann has decreed all schools will close after the Gorai Aurelia rally on the 23rd of this

month, until further notice. Is there any reason for it?'

'Doctor Caufmann has decided that since public unrest is increasing over the nervous system sickness that's been spreading, he has organised flu vaccinations to be distributed to as many as possible since it has been blended with a solution to aid immune response to anything that may attack the nervous system. Closing the schools is a temporary measure to slow the spread of the affliction by limiting contact between students,' says Gainsford.

'A vaccine won't do any good for someone who already has *the virus.'*

'There is nothing to confirm it's a virus,' says Gainsford quickly.

'Vaccines are primarily used to prevent viral infections, correct?'

'You must understand that I'm not a scientist, only a spokesperson. The technical information should be heard from Doctor Caufmann."

'Is there anything available for those who are already sick? As opposed to those that are yet to be infected.'

'Nothing as yet, but we are working around the clock.'

'Mister Gainsford, thank you for your time.'

"And fuck you," says Rennin holding up a freshly poured glass of scotch.

'Always a pleasure,' he says as his hologram fades leaving only the lovely anchoress.

'That is your news for tonight, thank you for watching, I'm Ellie Andress, goodnight.'

Rennin could remember a time when flu vaccinations were only made available just before flu season hit, which in Raddocks Horizon used to be about April or May but in a rapidly expanding city with its own weather machine flu season is at any time.

Rennin likes Ellie Andress a great deal. Though in his opinion Gainsford's ugly head spoilt the view tonight. Rennin sighs and half an hour later he is unconscious on the couch subliminally listening to infomercials.

The next day, Rennin is sitting in the communal lunchroom away from the others when Michael Gainsford walks in and scans the room. Upon seeing Rennin he walks briskly up to him, taking brief stock of the watchman spooning food into his mouth.

"Stand up."

Rennin's face remains deadpan. He looks upwards with what looks to be severe effort. "I'm eating."

"We're going to Caufmann's office, right now. Get up."

Rennin shakes his head. "You're not my real Dad."

Gainsford is a visage of barely contained rage. "Explain this," he says slamming a newspaper down on the table. Rennin has made the front page. The shot features him, gun in hand, standing next to the

destroyed delivery truck.

"Did you buy a real newspaper just to do that?" asks Rennin with a chuckle.

"The article says you called the press office and went over last night and gave them all kinds of information!"

Rennin waves his hand dismissively, "Impossible."

"Do you know how this looks, you little shit?"

"What time was this interview?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me it does. I was home all night. I would like to know how I was interviewed without my knowledge," says Rennin without blinking.

Gainsford leans on the table so close that Rennin can smell his breath, "I don't care for your smart mouth and you don't intimidate me, Farrow. Stand up."

"I'm eating."

Gainsford slaps Rennin's tray off the table onto the floor. All other eyes in the lunchroom look over to them. Rennin catches Jellan Roths' eye for a moment while she absently scratches at her arm.

Gainsford is still staring at his eyes.

"Get up."

Not long after, Rennin and Gainsford are in Caufmann's office. The doctor looks terrible. His clothes are rumpled, his hair is matted despite being quite short, and his eyes are sunken. With the green glow from his eyes he looks quite necrotic.

Gainsford is just finishing the summary of his accusations against Rennin when Caufmann puts his hand up. "It wasn't him."

The spokesman is surprised at his dismissive tone, "But, William, this article has printed things that they couldn't have made up."

Caufmann's expression gives nothing away. "Rennin has executed several traitors already, it stands to reason there are more."

"I beg your pardon?" Gainsford swallows audibly.

"I myself have even executed some staff, and will probably have to kill a few more."

There is a long intense silence but Gainsford musters the strength to speak again, "Why?"

Caufmann tilts his head back a little in his chair as if pondering an answer, "Let's say… espionage."

Rennin smirks.

Gainsford is obviously not convinced, "Spying? For whom?"

"Does it matter? Employment Contract clearly states that termination is immediately put into effect upon a staff member leaking *any* sensitive information to outside sources."

"Termination does not warrant execution!"

“You’re a lawyer, Michael, you know how open to interpretation the English language is.”

“This is not a joke.”

“Am I laughing?” asks Caufmann.

“What kind of work is so sensitive that you have to shoot anyone leaving?”

“This installation is the foremost of its kind. Our experiments involve some of the most dangerous materials and pathogens known to this world. Some of these experiments would reach untold material wealth.”

Gainsford doesn’t seem convinced. “But—”

“I can explain it all to you but you’d never be allowed to leave the lower levels of the lab,” interrupts Caufmann.

Gainsford leans back almost as if slapped, “The rumours are true, aren’t they? The illegal research, the viruses, it’s all true.”

Caufmann’s smile makes his strong features look gaunt and nearly diseased, “If I tell you, you’ll become a permanent resident.”

Gainsford says his brief goodbyes and exits the room leaving Rennin with Caufmann.

“Sir?”

Caufmann grunts. “I’ve told you not to call me that, Ren.”

“Either way, I have a question, Billy.”

Caufmann arches an eyebrow and sighs, “Sir it is.”

“There is a Beta HolinMech unit in city.”

“I know that.”

“They also want to apprehend the Progenitor-class,” says Rennin unable to stop himself.

“I know.”

“I should have mentioned this a while ago. They have a backup objective.”

Caufmann’s eyes become infinitely more focussed.

“They’re after someone codenamed: ‘*Arbiter*’.”

Caufmann doesn’t move but something in his eyes turns sharp.

Rennin isn’t sure if he should tell Caufmann anything more, but his mouth just keeps talking without any real permission, “They mentioned you.”

“Did they?” Caufmann’s tone is becoming cold.

“Well it might have been in passing,” says Rennin quickly, “only to say that you said Arbiter was the pinnacle of something.”

Rennin is sure he’s imagining it but Caufmann’s presence seems to be throwing a cold chill into the room.

“You didn’t think to mention this before?” asks the doctor, boring a hole through Rennin’s eyes.

The watchman is feeling very anxious now, “Look, sir, I just

thought you'd be interested in—"

"I am. Continue."

Rennin takes a slightly shaky breath. This is ridiculous, he's a war veteran and shouldn't be so scared of someone he describes as a desk jockey, "That's about all, really. I'm guessing you didn't give them the mission."

"Not the secondary mission."

Rennin decides not to push for any more information since he's already feeling a little underwater, "I should leave you to it, sir," he says making a move to stand.

"Sit."

Rennin is back in the chair before he even registers the word.

Caufmann remains silent for a moment, just taking his time to eye Rennin closely. "I don't know who gave them their secondary objective but I imagine it was the Progenitor-class posing as me. They have the ability to mimic voices and it's not difficult to fake a hologram of another person. The only thing I find strange is that if it's the Progenitor-class unit I think it is, it already knows where the Arbiter-class is."

"It's Forgal Lauros isn't it?"

"Yes, he is an Arbiter-class."

"What about Saifer Veidan? He was one of the commanders, too," asks Rennin.

"Veidan is a different model, he has his own division."

"Do all androids have their own class to play in?"

Caufmann smiles, "Only the early ones. They made a lot of changes from unit to unit during the implementation and test phases. Most of the following units were assigned to the same class."

"How do you know all this? You're a little young."

"I'm a geneticist."

So what? "Why are you even telling me this stuff? I'm not ending up in the lower levels like those other prisoners."

"If you think this is sensitive information, I pity you," Caufmann pauses and his expression turns distant for a moment, "Or do I envy you?"

Rennin decides not to answer, "Sir, I think I'll return to my post," he says standing up and walking out.

Caufmann stares at the empty chairs on the other side of his desk for a moment, "That Progenitor wants Beta HolinMech to uncover Forgal Lauros. Why? Do you think Beta HolinMech will destroy the remains for you?" he smirks, "Is there any Forgal left?"

Caufmann buzzes his assistant and summons Doctor Talati Hillon to see him. His assistant is about to protest but Caufmann cuts the line. He does not have time for pointless arguments right now. He has

too much to do.

He muses a while longer before the door to his office flies up into the bulkhead, revealing a haggard looking scientist with blonde hair and blood stains on her coat, “What is it, William? This had better be important,” she says walking over and sitting down.

“Very well, I shan’t mince words. The experiment is nearly complete but the vaccine has come too late. The Progenitor has already released a contagious disease that gestates a parasite capable of terrible things. There are dozens of bodies in the lowest level of the lab being dissected. Some of them were brought in once the infection turned fatal but others had turned and attacked others.

“The infection from the original toxin takes a long time to fully complete its incubation cycle. When the infected person then contaminates another person, it implants a strain already adapted to the human body, hastening the process,” says Caufmann.

“There are dozens of bodies in the lowest level of the lab being dissected. Some of them were brought in once the infection turned fatal but others had turned and attacked others. How widespread is the infection?”

Caufmann sighs, defeat printed across his face, “Current estimates put contamination at over half of the city total.”

“How is that possible? It’s not airborne,” says Hillon.

“It is a synthetic DNA that’s been adjusted to be a contagious mutagen. We still haven’t found a sample of the original pathogen. We only know what it does, not where it comes from,” says Caufmann.

“The vaccine should work for those who remain uninfected, but there is a chance that it may do nothing or even accelerate the infection in those already exposed,” asks Hillon.

Caufmann’s jaw visibly clenches. “My organic shipments of test subjects were denied by the Portmaster, I haven’t field tested it. We have no one here to test it on.”

“What about more convicts?”

Caufmann laughs, “Because their lives are worth less?”

“No one misses them. It isn’t like they’re a considerable loss to society,” says Hillon.

“Justification any way possible? I don’t draw those distinctions, a test subject is a test subject. I will kill one to save two, thousands to save millions. That’s the only logical way to deal with this.”

“You find it that easy?”

“I no longer feel required to feebly grasp at tattered ideals to remain sane.”

Hillon blinks a couple of times, “Then what are you going to do?”

“I’m field testing it in the city. It’s the only way, we have *no* time to test it in the lab in a controlled environment. By the time we get

the results we need, the infection will be total."

"You may have just killed an entire city!"

"Raddocks Horizon is one city next to an entire planet. This city is already dead."

Hillon remains silent for a long moment, "So there's not going to be an evacuation?"

"Not at this time. Not until we know whether the vaccine actually works. The schools close after the GA rally on the 23rd, and the docks will be shut down soon afterwards. The Horizon Military will not be inoculated unless it's proven to work; we'll need them once the hostile infected emerge."

"This is an impossible fight. How do you expect to contain an entire city?"

Caufmann averts his gaze for a moment, "I have several D-class satellites in place to glass us, if and when it's necessary."

"You have access to Desolator satellites?" she asks rhetorically, gripping the bridge of her nose.

Caufmann says nothing and waits for it all to sink in.

She takes a long breath inwards. "How long before we're in serious trouble?"

"About a month before the hostiles become too numerous to contain."

"And we're not going to call for help?" Hillon asks.

"No unnecessary risks. No contamination. The plan is simple, we fight it on our own and if we lose, I'll activate the Desolator satellites."

"What about android help? We could call in for the fully cybernetic HolinMech Warrior unit."

Caufmann knows who's in that crew but remains absolutely deadpan, "No, that is not an option."

"Why not? They are Solar Special Forces and are a Godyssey owned project, it's within our power to get them here. They're androids, they're immune. The things they've done—"

"They are not to set foot in this city. Not until this infiltrator Progenitor-class is found and destroyed."

"You just said we don't have time. I helped design Magnus Breen's system I know what he can do! He's commanded them for four years." she says.

"There have been irregularities with them. One of them went AWOL if you haven't heard."

Hillon frowns obviously unaware, "Which one?"

"Unit Arca Drej."

Hillon makes a dismissive gesture, "Ah. He was nothing but trouble."

"How so?"

“He didn’t respond at all to authority.”

“He recognised Magnus’ authority well enough. From what I’m told he didn’t like the restrictions that were put on the crew,” says Caufmann.

“He’s not supposed to like or dislike, William, he’s a machine and should do what he’s told.”

Caufmann bites back a retort that may have been accompanied by a strike to the face, “Have you told Del that face to face? Would you tell Arca Drej?”

“Of course not,” she laughs.

“Drej was complaining of nightmares not long before he went missing.”

“How did he get out of Iyatoya Base?”

“He didn’t. He disappeared on mission.”

“Which mission, William?” she says growing impatient.

“Unknown. Something out near Jupiter.”

“Is there anything more we can do on the E-DNA?” she asks returning to the more immediate problem.

“The vaccine *is* the E-DNA,” says Caufmann.

Hillon looks hard at him. “You sent out an experimental retroviral gene sequence as a vaccine?”

“I told you, we are out of time.”

◆◆◆

Rennin is back in the food hall, having another attempt at eating his breakfast. Since that oafish twat, Michael Gainsford, isn’t around his half raw precooked chicken skewer should be safe.

The watchman pokes at the mashed potato that has the texture of particularly runny excrement, not that he regularly pokes his passed solids. He lets out a half cackle, unintentionally drawing attention from the other diners.

The newspaper article’s release brought home a terrible truth to many of the scientists and regular staff: Watchman Rennin Farrow will shoot you if you try to leave. His workplace relationships, such as they are, have always been tainted by his requirement of taking out escapees but it was always something that everyone refused to truly admit to themselves.

The article just threw it in all their snide faces. After all their years of schooling to become anally retentive virgin geniuses, the grunt with a gun on duty has their lives in his hands.

He looks up to see Caufmann and Gainsford entering from opposite sides of the food hall. Caufmann, with his hunched walk and

rapid stride, seems distracted or even oblivious to his surroundings.

Gainsford is in a mad rush, fury writhing across his facial features. He moves heavily and quickly across the room. He has definitely noticed Caufmann. The two are about to pass when Gainsford attempts to shoulder check the Head of Research upon passing.

The hit is meant as one of those schoolyard tactics that lets an enemy know you're not his friend without actually saying anything. The knock is hard, but Gainsford is the one thrown by it. He looks like he just walked into a solid block of concrete and is rebounded off balance to fall flat on his side, his face a mask of utter shock.

Rennin is impressed. Even more surprising, Caufmann doesn't even break stride, he just keeps walking until he's out of the food court as if Gainsford isn't even there.

When his shift ends after four dreary hours of replaying Caufmann's body knock to Gainsford over and over, Rennin is back at the pub across the road.

Just under three hours later, with four pints of rum and ginger ale under his belt, he's feeling the intense heat and numbness of intoxication. Thinking of 'The Caufmann Slam' now brings an ear-to-ear grin. Rennin hates Gainsford.

In fact, he can't think of one staff member he actually likes.

I could shoot them all.

That thought stops his swimming and dizzy mind for a moment and with a crystalline clarity he thought lost after the war he finally sees something he does well. Murder.

Not murder, maybe. Murder implies a crime of passion and Rennin Farrow would never kill someone at Godyssey out of passion because that would mean he's wasting what limited emotional bandwidth he has on those parasites. Then again, when he thinks of Caufmann in his crosshairs he does feel pause. He likes the doctor.

The bartender is not the robot this time, he notices, staring at the frame of a thirty-something year old pouring drinks with alarming inaccuracy regarding the maximum alcohol allowed per serve.

Despite it being the weekend there are barely any people at the bar. She passes a drink to the man to Rennin's left and he can smell the potency of that concoction. He makes eye contact with her with his reddened eyes. She jilts her head back in the what-do-you-want manner.

Rennin opens his mouth and the bar top is nearly greeted with a coating of his dinner brought on by a surprise convulsion.

He manages to suppress the purge. "I'll have what dingus—" gesturing to the guy who was next to him a moment before, but seems to have vanished, "—had."

She smiles and turns back to the bar to make the drink and Rennin's eyes seem to move on their own to her waistline.

"Holy God," escapes his mouth. Only a dribble of saliva running down his face would make him look like more of a sleaze.

She turns back and hands him the potion. He wrenches his eyes up to hers, "Cheers. Here's to something meaningful," he slurs taking a swig.

She arches an eyebrow, "Nothing in particular?"

He cringes at the taste, "Jesus…"

"To Jesus then," she says smiling, putting her hands together in the prayer fashion.

"Funny," he chokes out, wiping his mouth and feeling his insides burning, "what the hell was that?"

"Absinthian Siege."

"Absinthe?" He blinks hard, "That stuff is mean and I used to like liquorice."

"I recognise you. You're the guy in the papers, right?"

He shrugs, "I don't know anything."

"If you finish that drink as fast as the others you've had, you may never know anything again."

"Don't you have drinks to serve to real humans?"

"It's a quiet night. Most people are sick or just plain lazy," she says pretending to wipe the counter.

"Too lazy to get drunk? Impossible!"

"Well it's not the economy stopping people."

Rennin would have rolled his eyes if it wouldn't make him sick, "You have a theory." It is not a question.

She nods, "I think the rumours of those scientists being shot and that truck being blown apart have something to do with it," she says changing her mock cleaning to re-cleaning the cleaned glasses.

"That's great, but I didn't ask," he says winking and grinning while swaying lightly on his stool.

"You *are* the guy though, aren't you?"

He takes another swig of his Siege. Another fireball greets his insides. "Yes. I'm Rennin Farrow," he straightens his posture and puts on a pompous accent, "of the East Brighton Farrows."

"From Melbourne then?" she says knowingly, but feigning it as a question. As if his alcoholism is explained because of the destruction of the city.

"Before it beat Hiroshima for world's hottest town."

"The press have painted a pretty bad picture of you in front of that burning truck."

"That's okay, my drinks are paid by their taxes," he says slurring heavily now.

“It must be frustrating.”

In Rennin’s fuzzy state of mind something inside him thinks this woman is trying to relate to him. Perhaps she thinks he’s in some kind of trouble, either way Rennin feels a little insecure about talking.

Though, as always, the severe effects of the alcohol have removed most of his inhibitions, “It is a little. My job isn’t exactly easy, or nice,” he says managing to remember he cannot say anything about being an executioner of sorts.

“What is it you do?”

Rennin turns to his left on the barstool and points out the front window of the bar, across the street to the front wall of the Godyssey lab compound, and to his tower on the right hand side, “That clock tower is my orifice.”

She looks at him for a moment waiting to see if he’s joking. But no, it’s a Freudian slip, “How long are you up there for?”

“About ten hours a shift. Of course there’s a ninety-minute lunch break, two ten-minute tea breaks and three two-minute urinary cossets between them.”

She laughs, “Got it all, haven’t you?”

“Almost, except the scientists obviously aren’t allowed to bathe.”

“Is that so?”

“Probably bacterial experiments going on under those clothes. Judging by their personal aroma I imagine they wear NASA-class diapers to cope with those long shifts.”

“You imagine that, huh?”

Rennin takes a moment to click, “Oh I see what you did there. Kudos to you,” he takes the rest of the drink down in one fell swoop and everything else evaporates.

3.
Project Outreach

Rennin wakes up late for work. He knows he's late but the hangover is exploding in his brain so badly that he doesn't care. He's never even missed one day of work so they shouldn't exactly fire him.

Any monkey could take care of his duties, except the ones with extreme prejudice. His head feels like someone placed a Nexus Armaments Particle Annihilator grenade inside his skull and set it to maximum range. He opens his mouth and rotates his jaw a little trying to ease out some of the tension.

He is on his back staring at the ceiling with crust-filled red eyes. He wipes them with the backs of his hands before noticing something odd draped across his chest. *A third arm?* Rennin's face turns to dumbfounded surprise and he looks at the skinny arm that is, at least, a woman's. The last time he woke up with a man he couldn't get the taste out of his mouth all day.

He pulls the covers up slightly and gets a look at the sleeping face of the bartender. Alarm bells are ringing in Rennin's mind even louder than the hangover headache. With amazing dexterity he slips out from bed and lifts the covers more to find that she's still fully dressed and her pants haven't been touched. That is a good thing.

A *very* good thing.

Rennin is in the bathroom in moments to retrieve a needle from his bathroom cabinet before returning to the bedroom. She is still asleep, lying there in a serene way that sets off a mild pang in his chest. He pushes the feeling aside and locks it back in its box. He steps over to her and, holding his breath, pricks her arm in one perfectly precise movement.

She grumbles lightly and rolls over and Rennin is already out of the room.

Back in the bathroom, Rennin removes a gadget from the medicine cabinet that looks like an old style calculator. He slips the needle with the blood sample into the slot at its base and awaits the reading, fidgeting and clicking his teeth. The machine beeps and he looks at the display: '*Result Negative*'.

Rennin sighs in relief. They didn't have sex.

Early in the war Rennin and some others were hit with a GA biological weapon called Indigo Reign, named as such because the victim's veins would turn purple, and permanently stain the eyes.

It was a weapon that was specifically designed to attack the organic and mechanic cohesion of the CryoZaiyon android. It would

shut down the parameter that tells the body's organic nerves to ignore the mechanised intruder system. The android would go into a violent convulsive fit.

Inside the toxin itself was a nano-virus code that told the android mind to release the pain receptors from the blocking buffers. The android then could feel the pain of the conversion surgeries with no programming to stop it, and also no automatic shut off when the pain became too intense.

The result was catastrophic. Unbearable to witness. Contaminated androids went down very quickly, and within minutes were reduced to a screaming ruination too horrendous to be left alive.

It was never meant to affect humans, but it did. Thousands died, though the effects were far more protracted. The first hour was uneventful. The second was when the affects began. Rennin remembers feeling dizzy and a strange pain, like mild sunburn being scratched, spreading across his body from the spine outwards.

As with the androids, it attacked the nervous system in people too. Within three hours his entire body was aflame with pain like he was on fire himself. Another hour after that, all he could see was white flashes and hear sporadic waves of his own screams inside the rushes of agony.

Rennin was saved by the timely arrival of a rescue unit, led by an android Medtech trooper, Nexarien Decora, who had synthesized a cure for it. Or at least it suppressed the effects of it, but you would always carry the bioweapon inside you wherever you went for the rest of your life.

There is a bitter irony in the use of Indigo Reign by so-called humanists. When a human is infected, the pain becomes so intense that they die from shock. In an android they would scream and thrash until their power core hit zero percent power, then they would shutdown to recharge, only to wake up screaming and thrashing again. They would do this until they were cured, or put out of their misery. The irony is that the GA said the *androids* had no souls, were inhuman. No one whom dares to say they 'fight the good fight' would design something that thoughtlessly torturous, so inhumane.

Rennin throws the needle away and puts the device back in the cabinet. He was told he wasn't contagious; that every man, woman, and child in the system had been vaccinated for Indigo Reign but he never trusted the word of a doctor or what he can't see.

Even all these years later the scars of it still mark him. His pale eyes are shot through with spokes of magenta. There is a faint purple ring around both his irises. The hue of his lips are also darkened to a colour more like maroon than pink. His skin is also unnaturally pale and darkened veins snake up the sides of his face. His reflection is a

constant reminder of that atrocity.

Remembering the pain always makes him lose his breath and he realises he's covered in sweat, panting like a tired dog.

"Hi there," says a sweet and drowsy voice from the doorway.

Rennin looks up so fast he sees stars for a moment and all he manages is a slightly awkward smile.

"Relax, we didn't do anything. You were absolutely shitfaced and started a fight with one of the soldiers last night. You took a nasty hit to the jaw."

Ah. That explains the stiffness. "So I didn't suck anyone off. What did I do?"

She smiles, "He had an attitude and you offered to help him explore his sexuality."

"Yeah that sounds like me."

"A little skinny soldier knocked his friend out to save you the trouble since you were sleeping by that stage."

Rennin's pride is hurt. "He knocked me out?"

"I think you were out long before he hit you."

Rennin bows his head conceding, "Look I'm sorry, I don't remember your name."

"Really?"

"I might have Alzheimer's but at least I don't have Alzheimer's."

She laughs, "Should I be worried? You're sweating."

"It's a long walk from the bed."

She stares at him.

"With a hangover."

"I see."

"So what's your name? You can either tell me, or I'll call you Steve."

"Carla."

"I'm Rennin."

"I think I have a cream for that."

Rennin narrows his eyes. "Well it's been a long time since there's been a woman in my home and even longer since I've woken up finding one in my bed."

"Well I wouldn't take that as a reason to get obliterated every night."

Rennin finds himself starting to grin, "With my head exploding like this? Not likely. But I do have a question."

She gestures for him to continue.

"I have a couch. You could have slept there."

She smiles and walks towards him, "I said we didn't do anything. Not because we didn't want to," she says just barely touching him.

Rennin feels a lump in his throat, "You'd best not get too involved

with me."

"And why not? Are your problems too deep and dark?" she says pursing her lips and pinching his cheek.

"I'm carrying something."

"I know, you told me last night. Indigo Reign. The entire human race is vaccinated or cured, you know. Although you pronounced it as '*Inni'o'rain'*," she says imitating a drunk. "Either way, it's pretty obvious with those baby-purples of yours."

"Well being a bartender I suppose you'd have to learn to decipher the lame-minded and crippled speech."

"Very funny."

"Look I'd love to stay but I have to get to work. I'm already late."

"Come by the bar after you finish."

◆◆◆

Rennin walks into the lab three hours late. Upon clocking on he is instantly tagged as overdue, and docked accordingly. He shrugs, grunts, then heads up his tower.

He sits in his chair feeling his thrashed and alcohol-ridden joints creak and groan. He unsuccessfully wills his body to stop whining, and turns to the left where his coffee machine protrudes from the wall.

The machine has only two settings: water and what equates to the caffeinated version of a nuclear heart attack. Its green-friendly biodegradable cup symbolises another irony of the Godyssey Company in Rennin's mind.

Before he even gets a sip the intercom buzzes indicating a visitor at the front gate. Rennin gets on the radio. "Hello, welcome to the Godyssey Laboratory, state your business."

A rather dark voice of a sex Rennin can't identify replies, "I am here to see Doctor William Caufmann."

"One moment please," Rennin switches the channel to Caufmann's office. "Sir, there is a visitor at the front gate requesting entry to the Lab."

"Scan it."

Rennin starts a bio-scan. The reading shows a massive quantity of titanium, Thermosteel and selenium. Rennin frowns as a system match is registered: *'Progenitor-class chassis.'* "Sir, it's your target. I'm arming turrets now."

"Negative, Ren, stand down."

You ordered me to kill it. "What? What do I do, then?"

"It knows we can scan it. Ask it what it wants."

Caufmann sounds far too calm for Rennin's liking. He switches

channels back to the android, “State your business.”

“I’ve told you,” it says with patience.

“He wants to know why you want to see him.”

“I’ve come to kill him.”

Rennin wills down a stutter. “Hold please.” Rennin switches to Caufmann, relaying its words.

“In broad daylight with a street full of people, it said that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Open the gate, say nothing more to it.”

“Sir?”

“Just do it, Ren.”

Rennin shuts off the radio unit completely and stares at the button on his console that opens the gate. He leans forward slightly to get a better view of the front gate where he can see the android, clad in black, standing at the entrance but the bars obscure any other details.

He takes a breath, checks his rifle and presses the button. The gates slide open. The android doesn’t miss a beat, and starts walking into the grounds. Rennin holds his sniper rifle up and aims at the strange machine walking through the grounds with perfect posture.

The being has long hair, tied back into a strange double ponytail, lashed together at three points down the length. The hair strands themselves are most certainly wires of some kind since the entire form of a progenitor model system is quite old and must have been built before the finer details were mastered.

The being’s face looks human enough but there are no distinguishing feminine or masculine features at all, making the face the epitome of androgynous. He gets a slight glimpse of silvery eyes before the android is facing away from him, reaching to open the front doors.

This construct is worth more than many entire countries and it’s just strolling through a city in the open, seemingly defenceless. People have killed to possess such technology, Rennin has no doubt of that. Rennin has to respect that kind of guts, even for an android. But he always has respected machines more than people. *People have a choice of whether to fuck you over.*

The android is wearing all black with knee high armoured boots, pants with many pockets up the legs, a vest that could be paramilitary and a leather overcoat with various designs embossed into the hide. The shoulders of the jacket look heavily padded in particular, or at least the leather itself is very thick. Rennin bets that the coat has an armour underlay, as would the vest.

The being enters the lab complex, disappearing from the watchman’s view. Rennin puts his rifle down and sits back down but

keeps the gun within easy reach.

He sips at his repugnant coffee absently, pondering what the progenitor could be thinking just walking into the lab like that. More to the point, Caufmann knows the thing is here to kill him. It said it with its own mouth, and he *still* let it in the front door.

Rennin Farrow frowns as he thinks of something Saifer Veidan once said to him: *'When your enemy comes knocking, it's best to let them in the front door where you can see them, rather than turn them away to creep up on you.'*

Sound advice.

"So, Caufmann, how are you going to get out of this one?"

◆◆◆

In the lobby, the android approaches the unexpectedly empty front desk.

It scans around quickly with its metallic eyes and finds the entire lobby absent of employees. The construct's expression shifts to a smirk. It doesn't suit its face at all. It remains perfectly still for a few moments when a door flies up across the hall and Caufmann emerges, his lab coat soaked in blood and his glasses shining.

In his hand is a dripping bone saw and the sight of it makes the android smile.

"To die fighting, is that it?" asks the android.

Caufmann shrugs minutely.

"Shall we?" asks the progenitor bowing as if requesting a dance.

Caufmann's expression remains neutral when he shows his other hand that is holding a matte black capsule about the width of his index finger.

The progenitor doesn't say anything, it just regards the capsule closely.

"I know what you are and more importantly what you're made of. You're a prototype; *the* Prototype Progenitor-class android designed for the template uses of all subsequent test types and production line androids. You were once war coordinator during the CryoZaiyon War and were also the catena for data from the Embryon Protocol.

You chose all candidates for the CryoZaiyon Program. Then were incarcerated indefinitely due to your astronomical value. How you are operational, or even functioning, is somewhat of a mystery."

"Incarcerated?" the expression on Prototype's face is cold and its eyes are shining furiously. It takes a step forwards.

"Stay where you are," Caufmann orders, again showing the capsule.

Prototype laughs. This disturbs the doctor because he can't tell whether the construct is just being theatrical or whether it's genuine. "What bioweapon do you possess that can affect me?"

"As I said, I know what you're made of."

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Rennin is meandering around his second sewage water coffee when the glass front doors of the lab shatter outwards followed by smoke. He drops his cup and his rifle in his hands in a split second. His scope is immediately trained on the smoke pouring out the entrance.

That android is going down.

There is a slight ripple in the plume, or perhaps a rush of air. Time seems to slow down as Rennin readies to fire but it is not the android fleeing the lab like he thought it would be. It's Caufmann, lab coat bloodied and torn, who is thrown into the courtyard.

Rennin's sights are back on the doorway, waiting for the progenitor but Caufmann dashes back inside leaving Rennin to wonder what is coming next.

What happens next is not something Rennin expected. Caufmann and the android are wrestling but the scientist looks to be dragging it outside, but that can't be right. Rennin looks closer and sees that it is indeed the case. Caufmann *is* dragging the android outside whilst the two of them are locked with hands at each other's throats.

Rennin's mouth falls ajar as Caufmann takes a right hook to the jaw that the sniper heard from the tower but doesn't go down. The doctor flicks his right arm and Rennin catches a glimpse of something long and slender sliding out of the sleeve.

His arm swings up impossibly fast striking the android in the neck drawing a spurt of dark fluid. The progenitor covers the wound clumsily stumbling away from Caufmann who faces Rennin's tower, points to his knee, then drags his index finger across his throat in the kill gesture.

Leg it. Rennin aims and fires a perfect shot striking the android in the left knee. The bullet glances off and hits the front of the lab. Rennin is shocked at this construct's armour strength. The ammunition he uses is about as strong as it gets.

The android looks at Caufmann, then to the tower and makes a dash for the front gate. Rennin fires again, hitting it in the same knee. The second bullet glances off like the first. This time, though, the android's balance is thrown completely by the bullet's impact, and it tumbles unceremoniously to the ground.

Rennin could put it down for good but Caufmann obviously wants it alive, so he takes another shot at the knee and finally the bullet achieves its goal. It punches through, drawing a spray of dark purple liquid.

The android screeches more from rage than any discomfort. The sniper cringes, the sound is remarkably like fingernails scratching blackboard.

Despite the heavily gushing wound, the android lifts itself and attempts a massive, albeit unbalanced, leap over the front gate. Rennin takes one final pot shot, hitting the thing in the upper spine. The shot glances off as the sniper knew it would, but the momentum throws the android off the wall into the street.

Rennin's communicator beeps and he can see Caufmann talking into his gauntlet in the grounds below. "Ren? Don't call for assistance."

"Why not? And I could have taken it out. I thought you wanted it dead!"

"I know. But now I need it alive."

The blade. "What was that shit you stabbed it with?"

"A nano-transmitter. A temporary and traceable blood virus. It'll wear off in a few days at best, but we'll know where it's going, if it's alone… or working with someone else, with a little luck."

Rennin has to hand it to him, Caufmann has balls. "Who's tracking it?"

"Beta HolinMech will follow it."

Caufmann turns to see several employees emerging from the foyer, so he hurriedly cuts communication and covers his arm with the remainder of his sleeve.

Security staff put the area back together over the next few hours, while Rennin wonders how Caufmann is going to answer all those questions about fighting a very combat-worthy android.

He smiles to himself as he thinks of his shooting. He comfortably leans back in his chair to ease the throbbing in his head. Four shots, four hits and one of them a successful crippling shot. It didn't impair its movement much, but a hit is a hit, especially since he wasn't supposed to kill the thing.

For just a moment when he had it lined up on the ground, he knew he could have taken its head off. Something inside him knows he should have.

◆◆◆

Caufmann is in his office, his upper body bared in front of a

mirror. He inspects his wounds, fresh and old. His torso is a sea of scars. Up and down his arms and his chest is another miasma of frequent surgeries. All of them self-inflicted.

There are quite a few smaller holes around his shoulders and chest that could only be bullet holes. He remembers some, but not others. Only the surgical ones he can fully account for. His scalp is riddled with winding incision marks, where he's been removing implants and learning about what he is, or once was.

His right arm—where his skin has been removed to seat the gauntlet—is sparking from time to time, drawing his attention. Prototype gripped his arm so hard it cracked the shell casing. A few of the underlying circuits are damaged.

Caufmann sighs, feeling that nagging razorblade pain in his chest for a moment before having a closer look at his fresh wounds. They steam mildly, but are already closed and fading.

He looks hard at his ruined body and his jaw clenches. He is glad his glasses are on because he can't bear to look himself in the eyes at this moment. Their luminous glow through jagged cracks in his irises haunts him more each day.

He barely recognises himself anymore, but not because of the scarring. Each time he removes an implant, it should make him feel less forged and more real, but it doesn't. He wonders how much more he has to excise.

There are some parts he will never be able to remove, he knows. However, after his fight with the android, he isn't sure if he wants to remove them all. That kind of strength can be very useful. He'd forgotten what it was like to fight like that. But the fact he even had to bothers him.

The fibre armour in his lab coat held up well enough to the incendiary grenade he threw at Prototype, but that android has had work done. No Progenitor-class should be able to take three sniper rounds from Rennin's rifle, which itself is illegal for the amount of damage it can do. No Progenitor-class has ever been rated as combat grade. The chassis has been extensively upgraded.

Without warning, Jellan Roths opens the door to his office and sees him in all his 'glory'. "Good god, William, what have you done to yourself?"

At first he doesn't fully acknowledge her. It's her absent scratching that draws his attention. His frame isn't the largest but his muscles are wound so tightly that he looks like he could go fifty rounds bare-knuckled.

"Did I call you?"

"No, you made a complete spectacle of yourself. What were you thinking?" Roths asks, wincing as she regards his body.

“I needed to get some samples.”

Roths scoffs. “What for?”

Caufmann faces her but isn’t paying attention to her words, just her periodic scratching.

“William, what’s that?” she asks, pointing at his right arm. “Didn’t I tell you that you can’t be seen doing things like that to yourself? What will the rest of the staff think?”

“I’d gone too far not to finish it. Now I can talk to other staff and order pancakes.”

“This is not a joke. Why did you deny security interception of the progenitor?”

“The *Prototype* is being tracked as we speak. We need to know if it’s working alone or with others, and that was worth the risk to me,” says Caufmann slowly.

“Worth the risk, what rubbish, you wanted to see it for yourself eye to eye, didn’t you?”

Caufmann smiles at how well she knows him. “Yes. Yes I did. I know it’s not alone. It’s wearing radically advanced armour. It took three rounds from Rennin’s rifle to get through its defences.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means we have to find where Prototype is going and kill it along with all who are working with it. This is not a capture mission. Once we find it and its accomplices, they will be killed.”

“You could have captured a rogue progenitor-class and you thought it best to play cat and mouse?”

“There’s more at stake here, we can’t just cut the fingers off the hand trying to open the door. We need the whole arm,” he says lifting his own, damaged, arm in front of himself for effect. “If you’ll excuse me, Doctor Roths, I have to repair my bracer.”

“There are tests being conducted in the lab and we need your guidance on many of them. Adrenin is taking far too long to gestate and Del’s programming is an absolute mess, it’s a miracle it even functioned enough to talk to that degenerate sitting in his tower.”

“Del is a *he* and Rennin proved once again why he has that job by four brilliant shots. If you knew how close his pay is to yours you’d be sick.”

“A warmonger earning five figures is more than he deserves.”

Caufmann points up indicating the figure is more dramatic.

“*Six* figures?”

Caufmann nods. “That war *veteran* is an expert sniper and finding someone of his quality to shoot any target when ordered is very difficult.”

“I hear he lives in that disgusting Godyssey commission housing area.”

“He does, yes. He said his needs are simple.”

Roths glares at Caufmann for a moment with an incredulous expression. “How often do you talk to this sniper?”

“Often enough to worry the general population.”

“General population is usually a term applied to prison inmates.”

Caufmann smiles. “Look around you. You think you’re free here?”

A moment of silence, and they fall back into desultory conversation, what lab supplies are running low, and how Del’s progress has been hampered by anomalies produced by his simulated Instinctual Cluster Unit. The first simulated IC Unit ever.

All business related topics exhausted, Roths leaves Caufmann to his thoughts of Del and IC Units. The original IC Units were postulated to house the remnants of the human soul from the donor body, supposedly giving them all the instincts of a real person.

The thought gives Caufmann the distinct feeling of indigestion and he hiccups slightly, tasting acid at the back of his throat. He scratches his chest and is reminded of Roths digging at her arm. A realization dawns on him.

She’s infected.

He can’t use the treatment on his staff yet as he isn’t sure of what it will actually do. He can’t afford to make things worse at this critical stage. Roths should still have a fortnight before things get really bad, so he decides to make maximum use of her until then.

Caufmann sighs and estimates that in one month the city will be overrun, but by what is another question. He’s seen this sickness do terrible things. The mutations are grotesque but the effects it has on the mind are as fascinating as they are horrible.

The treatment is untested and most likely hopeless, but it is literally the city’s only chance. He opens his radio to make his desperate gambit.

“Attention all Godyssey staff, initiate the closing stage of Project Outreach. I want all shipments of flu vaccinations out by tomorrow morning.”

Rennin is reclining in his tower thinking through the day’s events, replaying the shots taken at the android intruder. Armour that thick is rare, so rare that Rennin can’t think of a place that would have it available, much less how the progenitor-class could possibly attain such funding.

What he still can’t understand is why bother upgrading it to combat ready when assassin androids can be built for half the cost and

wouldn't bother making an appearance. It would just kill its mark. *Seems overly elaborate.*

Raddocks Horizon is in serious trouble, and for the first time in his long career he considers desertion. If that's what it is called when one abandons a corporate entity.

He remains seated for the rest of his shift, occasionally looking out to the streets that are a little busy for this time of night.

The pub can be seen across the street but the mirrored glass makes seeing into it impossible. He briefly thinks about using his thermal-vision goggles to see if he can make out Carla working at the bar. Since his shift is over in an hour, he decides against wasting the effort.

His hangover is almost gone now and the more it fades the more desertion is on his mind. Is it desertion? He's only a security watchman after all, despite his shoot-to-kill orders. He could give notice like a normal person but something inside tells him that if he tells them he's leaving he'll be denied and put under observation, or worse: made a permanent resident of Godyssey.

Eventually, and in painstaking time, his workday is over. He exits the lab into the night, to unintentionally mingle with the crowds of people swirling all around the streets. He wonders if there's some kind of night festival. Or maybe the Gorai Aurelia Rally is a few days early.

He paces up and down the street, wondering if he should go into the bar to see Carla or if he's really going to do a runner. Rennin isn't accustomed to feeling nervous about anything except when he's in a crowd unarmed.

He takes a breath and knows he's not capable of running away from this or anything else. He despises cowardice, no matter what glib label it's given, especially pacifism.

Then again he also hates the military, so much he even shot his superior officer when he made the mistake of forgetting his morals with a prisoner of war.

He'd also received remands for refusing to be a decoy in the field.

What kind of idiot would actually follow an order to commit suicide? Suicide sends you to Hell, after all. Not that Rennin's religious either.

He should have been kicked out for refusing that order to draw fire. Things were so bad towards the end of the war that they couldn't afford to. Of course, his superior officer not surviving the subsequent engagement helped.

Leaving his trip down memory lane where it is, he steps through the doors to the bar. He sees that there are quite a few people out and about this evening. Carla spots him from the bar and she's smirking at him. He realises he must look like a walking corpse.

He goes over to the bar and takes the only available stool at the

end, the furthest from the door. There are only four bar staff to deal with the onslaught of orders so Carla half swaggers over to him, “You look—”

“Like shit, yes,” he says before she can.

“Another Absinthian Siege?”

Rennin looks at her hard, “Not a chance,” he says slowly.

“I don’t have a lot of time here, Rennin, as you can see we’re busy.”

“I’ll have a coffee and an explanation,” he says.

“Explanation?”

“What the hell are all these people doing out at this hour on a weeknight? Don’t they know the monsters come out after dark?” despite his sarcasm there’s something dead in his eyes as he says that.

Carla meets his stare with a mocking glare, “These people are the monsters.”

Rennin finds a bitter smirk crossing his face, “Aye, madam, how right thee is.”

“I’ll get your order.”

“Sharp about it.”

“Don’t push your luck, Trigger.”

Next to Rennin sits a Beta HolinMech, the one called Drake as he recalls. Bright Eyes isn’t here with him and this soldier is swaying even though he’s on a stool. Rennin figures since he’s obviously drunk he might be talkative and so nudges him.

“Where are your buddies?”

Drake’s glazed eyes struggle to focus on him, “Hey it’s Happy,” he says slapping Rennin on the shoulder. “How’s it going? I see you here a lot.”

Rennin was wrong, this soldier is not drunk, he’s completely wasted, “Happy?”

“You know,” Drake does an impression of a sniper holding a gun, “Trigger happy.”

Rennin glances at Carla who’s serving someone down the bar, “Ah.”

“I’m Pharaoh Drake, Beta HolinMech S-66-83-49.”

The name rings a bell. “What’s the ‘S’ stand for?”

“Standard.”

Rennin takes a steadying breath. Standard. Again the distinction of expendable troops used as meat-shields slaps him in the face. Rennin does understand in a way. The androids fought because they were hated for being what they are and the humans fighting with them were only fighting to maintain the slavery of machines.

Though the androids Rennin served under were as brave as any man and never sent their human contingents into conflicts they

wouldn't face themselves. "I didn't realise the military still used that distinction these days."

"They don't formally, but old habits die hard. Especially since androids are working with us mere mortals again."

Rennin quickly scans the nearby patrons. "Are you here by yourself?"

"Yeah, the others got pulled on mission. I was already drunk so couldn't join them."

Rennin looks at him in surprise. "You get drunk while on call?" he laughs. Godyssey's standards must really be dropping.

There's that word again… pun and all.

"Oh come on, we were put on standby until further notice so I came for a drink."

Something clicks in Rennin's mind. "Now I know who you are. You're the heir to one of the largest fortunes in the Western World Remnant. Your father lives in Drake Mansion."

"*We* live there."

Rennin laughs again. "Until he kicked you out for having it off with the maid and his mistress," he laughs louder, "at the *same* time!"

Drake does try to look serious but automatically starts grinning. "Yeah well…"

"So since he owns part of the HolinMech Program, they can't kick you out for drinking on the job, huh?"

"You wouldn't believe what I've done to get kicked out of this shit."

"Why not quit? Sign that mentally incompetent document."

Drake's face turns rather disturbed. "It's not as easy as that."

"Why not?" asks Rennin, bemused.

Drake's eyes take on a renewed focus despite the alcohol and he leans over slightly, "Are you familiar with any of the full android HolinMechs?"

"No, but I served with androids during the CryoZaiyon Wars."

"Yeah, well, there's one in the Alpha Unit called Mikhail Raddocks."

Raddocks? Rennin frowns. "You have my attention, Drake."

"Rumour has it that Mikhail Raddocks is the brother of Nyder Raddocks, who made lord mayor of this city years ago. That's why it's called *Raddocks* Horizon instead of just Horizon now."

Rennin nods, "Bugger for signage." He has heard that the androids, whether old or new, were built from converted humans. He'd even heard of some androids going mad because they see themselves and their kind as the walking dead. There was a story in the news about some AWOL HolinMech who disappeared on mission recently.

“Are you saying he let his brother get converted?”

Drake smiles as if he’s educating a naïve child about the world, “Not let, *donated*. Donated alive.”

Rennin arches an eyebrow, “I beg thy fucking pardon?”

Drake nods, “I know. His own brother.”

Rennin doesn’t even notice Carla put his coffee in front of him. “Are you trying to say you’re worried that the same will happen to you?”

“Nyder’s brother becomes a HolinMech then the man becomes lord mayor. I’m in Beta HolinMech and twice removed from replacing an android called Xannon Janus.”

“Twice removed?”

“There are two ahead of me who will take his place before me.”

Rennin sits still for a moment and decides to see Caufmann in the morning. “I think you need another drink while I Irish up this coffee.”

◆◆◆

Second day hangovers are far worse than just the day after, Rennin has discovered for the umpteenth time. He remembers once issuing orders to himself never to *ever* let himself try to drink away one hangover with more alcohol. Unfortunately he’ll do almost anything to get information out of someone. Though, Drake was less forthcoming the longer they chatted.

It’s the next morning and Rennin is in Caufmann’s office waiting for him to come up from the experimental lab area. His codfish water-yeti secretary didn’t want to let him in while the doctor isn’t there. At least she wasn’t about to stand in his way or call security.

Again.

Rennin scratches at the Taser burn scar on the left side of his neck remembering the last time that scaly antediluvian called security on him.

It was about a year ago, when he got into his first fight with Michael Gainsford. The stinking coward ordered the secretary to call security after a well-placed knee to the groin.

Rennin was put in restraints and you don’t do that to someone who spent three months in a GA war prison. He went berserk and before he knew it there were a crowd of security. In the end the injuries totalled of three broken noses, eighteen fractured ribs, two broken arms and a punctured lung before Rennin took a ten thousand volt Taser round to the neck. It nearly killed him. But he feels it was well worth it for Gainsford to be sent up an octave.

He’s still pondering that memory when Caufmann enters his office

distinctly limping on his right leg. He sits down and faces Rennin directly. “Something you need?” his voice sounds sick. Very sick.

“I met Pharaoh Drake last night.” Caufmann isn’t about to humour him by feigning curiosity, so Rennin continues. “He told me about Nyder Raddocks donating his brother to the HolinMech Program. Is it true that those androids are built using human bodies?”

“You really want to live here, don’t you?”

“I have no intention of living here, I’m not even sure I want to remain here now. Something is seriously screwed up.”

Caufmann looks distracted. “Have you had your flu shot?”

Rennin’s panic bell starts ringing at the thought of needles, “I’m busy.”

“It’s mandatory.”

“You’ll have to kill me before I let anything produced by this lab into my body.”

Caufmann isn’t intimidated but his body language certainly indicates a loss of patience, “I don’t have a great deal of time to deal with your petty concerns.”

“Look, Caufmann, the mayor of this city donated his own brother to the HolinMech Program, I just thought you might be interested in that,” he says standing up.

Caufmann puts his hand up, “Sit down.”

Rennin does so automatically before even registering the researcher’s words.

Caufmann tilts his head slowly to the left making a rumbling noise at the back of his throat. “Drake must have a big mouth.”

“He was drunk.”

“It’s a good thing in this case,” Caufmann clenches his right fist while it rests against his desk. “Project Outreach is reaching its final stage and not a moment too soon, seeing as the GA rally is only a couple of days away. I need you at that rally. Prototype knows what Beta HolinMech look like, but it will not know you. I am certain it will be there, I need you to take it out.”

Prototype? Fair enough. “Exactly how do you want me to do that in a crowd of people?”

“Don’t miss.”

“Why not let a proper professional handle this?”

“I trust your capabilities. The tracking serum I put in its system will still be traceable enough to give you a good direction until you can visually identify it. All other attempts to track it have been disastrous. It’s hiding in the sewer system and there is too much interference to hunt it effectively.”

“Why would it be at the rally?” asks Rennin.

“Because it thinks I’m going. I’ve told the local Gorai Aurelia

group that I'm going to participate in the debate they're holding."

"Why not lure it outside the city wall to a more isolated place? Non-combatants are taken out of the equation then," says Rennin.

"Nothing is getting out of this city for the time being. The only shipments currently leaving are the last consignments of Project Outreach. It's taking longer than I'd like."

"The vaccinations?"

Caufmann nods. "Travel out is restricted until we get the local nervous system infection under control."

This is serious, far more serious than Caufmann is even capable of letting on. "Sir, if you'll excuse me."

Caufmann waves his hand in dismissal. "Thank you for telling me all this, Ren, it's shed some light on some other problems."

"No problem," Rennin says as he stands up again and heads for the door.

Caufmann calls after him. "And get yourself vaccinated."

"Yes, sir."

Not a fucking chance.

4.
The Rally

Rennin Farrow feels as obvious as herpes lesions on a porn star.

It is a minute to midnight on September 23, and it is snowing in Raddocks Horizon. Rennin stands in the miasma of people looking over the general crowd. At this point he's assessing the threat to his will to live.

Under his knee length leather coat, he has both his most modified and lethal pistols. Most of his head is covered by a hood, attached to a jacket lined with an armour-weave underlay strong enough to stop an android punch but not a knife or bullet. His overcoat has subtle titanium plates inserted at various points for extra protection. His pants are also armour-weaved with moulded plates over the knees and solid plates over each shin, matched with titanium capped and heeled boots. His entire outfit is black.

Just for something different.

He thought he'd be rather inconspicuous in a crowd of a few thousand, but the crowd is tens of thousands strong. They take up the entirety of Main Road for three kilometres. Mostly they are all wearing bright colours bringing a stark contrast to his umbral appearance.

Rennin still finds it amusing after four hours that in a nearly completely neo-gothic city so many hippies turned up in one place. *Someone must have organised a free ultra vegan dolphin friendly tofu hotdog stand.*

The nano-tracker inside the Prototype is degrading rapidly, according to the display in Rennin's glasses. Caufmann ensured he was equipped with a pair, modelled on his own, before leaving for the rally. Rennin felt at the time like he was being dressed for his first day of school by a doting parent.

Although he can't pinpoint the Prototype's exact location, he can tell that it's on ground level straight ahead within the next two hundred metres. Rennin's head is lowered and his body is perfectly still as he tries to collect himself while the people shuffle and shout all around him.

He clenches his fists feeling his leather fingerless gloves creak. He gains a mild swelling of confidence because those gloves—with their spurred knuckles—are what he used to wear during the war. He makes a mental note of how odd it is that something so small can make such a large difference. He can almost push away the feeling that he's going to die tonight.

The rally has organised five guest speakers from various tree-hugging groups around the country to incite aggression and convince the people to stand against Godyssey and their android slaves. Even though the general masses could not care less, so long as they arrive home in time for the puerile resurgence of Reality TV.

In fact, a great deal of the local population feel safer thinking a strike team of fully armed androids is waiting to come to the rescue if anything goes horribly wrong.

As is usual with these situations, a loud-mouthed minority is running around making all the noise, followed by a few morons desperate for a reason to exist jumping on the bandwagon in a misdirected attempt to look cool. Rennin is absolutely convinced most of these people are here trying to find some poor meat-sack with lower intelligence and even lower self esteem to bed for the night.

The speeches at least provide a distraction so Rennin can locate the Prototype, without being bumped and jostled by the drunken crowd. Despite knowing which direction, the hazy distance reading doesn't raise his confidence much at all.

At that moment the music from the rigged-up stage begins, giving Rennin a mild fright. It's some new age, past century revival or contradiction, based on music from the late 1900s but with less soul and more calculus.

Most of the nightclubs in the area are beginning to open, and if he loses Prototype's locator signal now the hunt is over, so he steels his nerves and begins to make his move toward the remainder of the signal.

The loathsome guttersnipes are starting to get devastatingly drunk. They stumble about the streets mewing at one another in tones and phrases Rennin forces himself to block out. It's at the point where all he can hear is background noise that sounds like feeding time at a farm.

He almost reaches the end of the rally, that has become somewhat of a mardi gras, when the reading of the Prototype temporarily becomes clear enough to get a good idea of distance. He looks to the side of Main Road where a strip of bars and clubs are open. The tracker reading is coming from inside the middle building.

Rennin watches as the last of the signal dies out completely and he sighs deeply. *Now or never.*

The club is called Starsprite and is a well-known alternative event, meant to be one of the most sought after spots to be in the Raddocks Horizon nightlife. Rennin thinks back to Prototype's appearance and Starsprite would be the perfect camouflage for an androgynous black clad skin job.

He walks up to the front doors where there is a small line. Rennin

can't afford to wait in the queue, so he decides to go straight for the door knowing it will raise his profile but better that than lose Prototype altogether.

Upon reaching the VIP-only entrance he's confronted by two bouncers that put Rennin's powerful form to shame. One of them holds up his hand and speaks in an obviously put on deep voice that makes Rennin want to sigh and roll his eyes. "Hold up, pilgrim, you on the list?"

Rennin feels a terrible heat rise inside him that is merely the result of the anxiety he feels. He wants to kill this man. "No."

"Back of the line, pal," says the other and Rennin decides to differentiate them with the call sign B1 and B2 since these meatheads look like twins. Rennin holds regard for them at the same level as a banana.

"I'd rather go straight in, it would make me happy."

B1 leans towards him, "Are we going to have a problem?"

If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that. Rennin isn't intimidated but he doesn't want to give his name or show his Godyssey ID in case the Prototype somehow gets wind of it. Either way, Rennin has to handle this mess quickly. The people in the line are starting to pay too much attention. He leans in to the bouncer making a show of hands that he's not going to try anything and whispers, "I have a delivery on me, okay?"

B1 looks at him hard, "Can I see it?"

"Okay I'll rephrase. I have a delivery *in* me, get me?"

B1 nods, "Alright," and signals B2 to let him through.

Rennin steps up to the doorway and can see a haze that makes him shudder. A nano-field designed for sound dampening envelops him as he passes. He breaks out in a sea of goosebumps feeling the insides of his ears tingle. His eyes also itch but after a moment the sensation ends and the music blares to life all about him.

The nano-field was originally developed to aid against noise pollution during the night hours but in the last decade they developed another system underneath the floor. Below Rennin there is a mechanism that's rigged with a sonar-like plate where the music is sent out silently by resonating through the floor and into the people's bodies where the inner ear absorbs the vibrations that gives the impression of blaring music. The nano-dampening field is to stop the resonating sound from spilling into the streets.

Rennin keeps his hood up while he climbs the stairs, feeling the music get louder and louder. The staircase is flanked on the left by a blood red water feature protected by a pane of glass that covers the whole wall. The staircase and the entire stairwell itself is painted black with posters of various local artists all over the place.

He arrives in the main area that is more jam-packed than a sardine tin. The music is so loud he feels the need to squint his eyes as if it'll help. Rennin is wearing a belt that Caufmann designed that emits a perfectly calibrated counter signal, which completely silences the music, so he engages it. The music drops out totally, reducing the only sounds to people shouting at the bartenders or each other, clanking drinks, and the shuffling of people dancing. For a moment Rennin is mesmerised by how idiotic these twits look dancing in apparent silence.

Men and women, boys and girls, are everywhere and all over each other with some requiring a close look to designate their gender. A lot of them could be Prototype at first glance but Rennin is sure he would know the android when he sees it. This is the perfect place for Prototype to hide.

Rennin notices a blonde woman standing at the bar and despite her makeup he recognises her from one of the Raddocks Horizon primary schools, a nurse if he remembers correctly. She came to the lab complaining there weren't enough flu shots in their shipment only a few days earlier.

She is staring at someone in the far corner of the club, with very little subtlety. Following her gaze he sees the figure in the corner, illuminated briefly by the flickering strobe lights.

Rennin's left hand twitches as he instantly recognises Prototype crouched on a seating area elevated from the dance floor in the back corner. The android isn't looking at him, but rather glaring back at the blonde at the bar and in the flashes of strobe light Rennin can see the soulless silvery metallic eyes even from across the room.

The android breaks eye contact to begin scanning across the crowd. Rennin makes the bar his focus and sees the flaxen-haired woman make a slightly frustrated pout before taking a swig from her drink.

The bar top is solid wood stained red and varnished. Like the rest of the place, it looks like a cross between an industrial factory and the bleeding décor of the entry stairwell.

Once he's gotten himself a drink he takes up position next to the vexed blonde. He stands to the left of her so as to keep her between him and the android. Feeling a little more confident with his hood and glasses camouflage, he leans on his elbow to face her and decides to speak. "I don't think he's interested."

She doesn't even acknowledge that he said anything, she remains with her back to the bar, hand curled around her glass, one leg straight and the other crooked. Rennin notices she's wearing a skirt that's little more than a belt. *Thighs that could crack your ribs.*

The watchman realises that the music, which he can't hear due to

his belt's interference, must still be blaring and she would never have heard what he said. He disengages the dampener and music instantly thunders in his ears making him jump, spilling a little of his drink.

He nudges her gaining a look from her bright green eyes that are venting hostility. "I don't think he's interested," he cries over the music.

She huffs slightly as if scoffing, "I suppose you are?"

Rennin is off-guard already. Exactly what is he doing talking to this woman? "If it makes you more comfortable, I lost my nuts in the war." Completely untrue, he reminds himself as if his reproductive system will be offended. But whatever keeps her talking, so he doesn't have to, will be said. No exceptions.

Both her eyebrows disappear behind her fringe. "Well that's one I haven't heard."

"It's not exactly the best pick up line, I admit."

"If someone doesn't want sex, it's perfect."

"What are you trying to get that thing's attention for, anyway? Don't you think he looks NQR?"

"Not Quite Right?" she laughs. "Who here does? Even you look like a freak," she taps his jacket where one of the plates is bulging slightly. "Is that Kevlar?"

Rennin's mind stalls again, "Yeah, I have a bike. Safety first."

She smirks and leans closer to him, "Another thing not to do when picking up is being cautious."

He nods, "Check."

"You look very devil-may-care, though," she says, slurring slightly.

"Have you seen that guy here much?"

"Almost every week. He never talks to anyone."

Rennin takes a mock closer look, "How can you tell it's a he?"

"Leave him alone, he's absolutely unique and I find him beautiful."

She's going to eat those words if she finds out what it is. "You like different looking people?"

"Unique looking, yes. You have a name, dingus?"

"Rennin," he says holding out his hand.

"Eleanor," she says taking his hand. "My god, your hands are rough. You really were a soldier, huh?"

Rennin nods.

Eleanor looks at him closely, "World War One or Two?"

"I look damn good for my age, thank you so much, and I don't have to forget my underpants to attract a mate."

"Still, you should show a little more skin than you are, even at your age. Are you here trying to land a donor?"

“A what?”

“A vaginal donor.”

Rennin coughs out a surprised laugh, “No, I’m just curious about the scene.”

Her face turns deadly serious suddenly. “What did you say your name is?”

Oh fuck. “Rennin.”

Her head tilts, “I’ve heard that somewhere,” she says leaning back slightly.

Rennin gets a good look at her eyes as she’s leaning and can see her dilated pupils. So she’s high. He knows it is time for him to move on and hope she’s high enough to forget about him by morning. “Thanks for the chat, I’ll see you around.”

She nods and returns to ogling Prototype.

Rennin turns the belt’s signal disruptor back on and the music instantly drops out. He looks to Eleanor one last time, “You are so hot, it’s intensely unfair,” he says at normal volume.

She doesn’t react.

“I guess you really can’t hear a thing,” he says before stepping away from the bar and across to the other side of the dance floor to keep a bit more of an eye on Prototype.

As he’s crossing the dance floor he moves between the people, the dancing and the swaying, with fluid precision not touching any of them despite the close proximity. He reaches the wall that seems to be lined with the *really* wasted people. They’re all leaning against it with eyes closed or just staring into space whilst nodding or bopping along to the music.

The tracks are obviously getting faster because the green, red and blue light show is devouring his vision with alarming voracity. Rennin stands against the wall with sea of drunkards and waits for an opportunity to make his move.

Caufmann wanted an update should he find Prototype, but sending a transmission so close to the progenitor-class might prove fatal if it’s got the ability to intercept signals. Rennin is also quite sure it possesses a similar disruptor for the music signal.

As a couple of hours pass the crowd becomes more degenerate; trashy even. Rennin has made a few trips to and from the bar but only to order lemonade. Prototype hasn’t moved.

Eleanor has vanished somewhere or other and she was not looking well in the minutes leading up to her leaving. She briefly made contact with the progenitor but it smiled blandly, indulging her for a few moments before they separated. *Well Eleanor separated, the android just sat there.*

Rennin rubs his arms against his weapon holsters and hopes to

himself that Caufmann's little bullet additive will do the trick. The good doctor told Rennin to make a hit, location irrelevant, on the android and flee. Nothing more. Just a single hit will do it.

Caufmann did take the time to explain to him the exact chemical that he applied to the bullets but Rennin didn't understand all that egghead talk. As near as he can tell it is some kind of oxidizing agent that acts like a blood virus, literally eating the android from the inside out.

Caufmann made a ridiculous pun, saying the most important thing you can ever know about your enemy is what they're made of.

IQ of eleventy-thousand and that's *his A-material?*

Rennin believes that he's passed more workable humour through the down-pipes after a harsh curry, but he still finds himself smirking at the comment.

The Prototype stands up and Rennin's body is instantly awash with adrenaline. It comes on so quickly he sees a white flash, and feels the world fall out from under him for just a moment. The android moves with an uncannily smooth ease through the crowd. It still hasn't noticed Rennin but he has a nagging feeling that its apparent ignorance of him is feigned.

Rennin slaps that feeling away but he has a distinct doubt about all this.

Being so close to this thing alone, despite being surrounded by club-going masses, makes him immensely ill at ease. The android moves across the bar, towards the stairwell but instead of descending it swerves behind to the toilets. Rennin's nerves screech at him to follow but if he does too quickly it'll be far too obvious.

After waiting for what seems like the entire Cretaceous Period Rennin can't take it anymore. He heads straight for the toilets in a bee line almost bowling over three people without noticing. His adrenaline floods again, causing everything to seemingly slow around him. Smaller details sharpen in focus and the only sound in his ears is his pounding heartbeat.

The toilet has a queue but he walks straight past, earning some snide comments. The place stinks. There are three stalls lining one wall and a urinal trough lining the other, with basins next to the door. Once inside he moves straight to the sink, making a show of washing his hands.

Turning his back on the room of human waste, Rennin realises he is wearing his gloves and they're rather annoying to remove. He is about to curse himself when a gust of cold night air brushes past him from behind. *Night air?*

He spins around, standing on the tips of his toes to see far enough over the stalls to check for a window, and he spots an open one in the

third stall.

Rennin walks across casually to bust it open, easily snapping the rudimentary lock, surprising two clubbers having sex. Rennin doesn't notice. After half throwing them out of the stall he climbs on the toilet seat looking out the window. Rooftops.

This is not where Rennin wants to be, but he has to be fast because the android clearly knows it's been spotted. One of the sex fiends is swearing at him and Rennin briefly wonders what kind of sex they were having for it to smell so bad before launching himself through the window to land relatively quietly on the roof.

A light snow is still falling, with a thick fog descending to make things more difficult. Visibility is not too badly obscured at the moment, though the sounds of the rally are muffled out a little due to the density of the air. In fact the slightly deadened cheers and music from the rally puts an entirely new kind of discomfort within Rennin's chest.

His glasses' scanner spots something like a radiation trail to his right, so he sets off at a slow jog across the pitched rooftops, up and down, up and down.

Someone seems to flick a switch on the city's weather machine turning the snow into a rather heavy rain almost in the blink of an eye.

After a few buildings he starts to slow down as it dawns on him that he's lost the Prototype. He lets out a huff and stops. "Stupid, useless, idiot," he mutters at himself.

Despite dressing himself down, he honestly can't think of a way he could have taken the thing down any quicker, short of walking right up and blowing its head off. Though Caufmann said he only needed to land one shot.

Too late either way.

As he turns away, a massive blow strikes his side hard enough to throw him clean off his feet. Rennin is surprised to find himself on his back and rolling down the slope of the roof, only stopping when he falls into the V between connecting buildings.

He looks up in shock, choking out a breath knowing that he would be drowning in his own blood if it wasn't for his armour-weave, just to see Prototype standing on a roof peak soaking wet, long hair hanging down, wearing a bland smile and black overcoat.

Rennin lost his glasses in the fall and can barely breathe. It feels like he was hit in the ribs by a flying anvil. He wants to go for his gun but if he does he knows the thing will be on him in a moment's notice. He sucks in another half-gasp feeling a shooting pain in his side. His ribs are definitely broken.

He tries his hand at talking to distract it. "Was I that obvious?"

Prototype seems to pause for a moment. “I heard you talking to the woman at the bar,” it says and even with the rain coming down, its metallic voice cuts through the noise.

Now Rennin feels like an absolute fool. He should have known the android would be able to filter out the music. He had to shout so loud for Eleanor to hear him, he might as well have painted a sign on his face. He can see how ridiculous he must have looked.

This can’t be it for me. “Any tips for next time I do this?”

The prototype’s expression remains the same. “Don’t get your picture put in the news if you’re planning to be inconspicuous.”

I am such a dickhead. “Sound advice. So we shake hands and part ways as mates, right?”

“I am unable to comply with that,” it says, still brandishing a soft smile.

“Look, don’t be like that. Just talk to me. I served under your kind in the war. We were on the same side once. What’s all this about?” asks Rennin still attempting to draw a full breath.

Prototype nods, “I am aware of that. It’s why I didn’t kill you straight away.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Humans require closure. It is not my intention to cause you any pain. I assure you, it will be quick.”

“You don’t need to do this,” says Rennin feeling his voice crack.

“It isn’t to do with necessity, it’s about practicality. There is a sickness here, in this city. It will end human kind as you know it. You work for the creatures responsible,” it says with a subtle change in expression only visible around the eyes.

“What sickness?”

“Decades ago a ship went missing. It was the first ship to test the Leap Drive, a form of zero mass transmission. Only one survived.”

The Montrialis. Rennin knows the story from school. One of the very first androids was on that ship. He can vaguely remember the android on board went completely berserk and killed the crew. “What does that have to do with a sickness?”

“The survivor came back in a pod. That ship landed somewhere. The crew of the ship had found something, and he kept it with him when he returned to Earth. And now it’s loose here,” it says turning to face the broad cityscape.

“You think Caufmann did it? Is that why you keep trying to get into the lab?”

It nods solemnly, “I thought it would ease your mind if you knew that I plan on preventing this from happening, before I kill you.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. “Yeah, thanks.” Rennin huffs, feeling another spark of pain in his ribs.

“Try to relax. It will hurt if you’re tense.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls,” he says forcing himself to pull in more air.

It starts making its way down towards him in a manner Rennin knows well. His superior during the war was a CryoZaiyon lieutenant of terrible power. He was a force of industry; not nature.

Thinking quickly, Rennin leans back. Reaching into his jacket, he grabs his gun. Without taking it from the holster he fires, trying to lean on a rough angle that might result in a hit. The glowing yellow shot tears a hole through his coat missing the android by a country mile before sailing off into the distance.

Prototype smiles again before reaching down for him. At the same moment Rennin pulls the gun out of his coat aiming it right at Prototype’s head. With the back of its hand, the android taps the gun off angle and another shot flies off course, this time into the roofing.

Prototype grips his wrist, ensuring the gun is dangling uselessly, and hoists Rennin off the ground with an ease that chips another wedge out of his ego. The android clamps its fist closed. Rennin screams at the crushing of his wrist bones, dropping the gun before he’s thrown back onto the roof, near one of his previous wide shots.

Rennin does his absolute best to ignore the burning pain in his shattered right arm as Prototype seems to gloat over him. He realises that the android isn’t looking at him but the bullet hole. Rennin glances over to see that the hole is rapidly expanding. The metal is being dissolved before his eyes.

He looks back to the android and for the first time sees a look of doubt on its face. Most likely due to it being unwilling to risk a wound by one of these bullets.

The android grips Rennin by the collar and lifts him up to land a blow to his head that sends a flash over his vision before he’s dropped again. The hood absorbed most of the shock but he’s still in so much of a daze that he finds his mind swimming.

He can’t gather his thoughts and the ones that enter his mind are scattered. He finds himself wondering if he turned off the coffee machine before leaving work this evening. The scent of the kitchen in the house where he grew up is also present.

Rennin regains focus in only his right eye. He blinks as if that will click his left eye on. It doesn’t. The entire left side of his face is numb. A light body check from this android broke his ribs and a calculated strike has cracked his skull. If it weren’t for the hood absorbing the shock, he’d surely be dead.

His wits come back to him to see Prototype’s face only inches from his own. At first he thinks it strange until he feels a hand beginning to clamp across his throat. The grip is cold and feels like

cast iron. The stars he was seeing after being hit in the head are already back as his air is cut off.

Rennin tries bracing a leg against the android's chest, but the machine is too heavy to lever off. His right hand is useless and numbed from shock. He is weakening quickly, unable to see at all now so decides to do something drastic.

He uses his good hand to draw the second gun. Prototype is taken off guard but Rennin knows it won't last. He crooks his arm at an awkward angle, and fires off one of the high calibre rounds. His elbow dislocates painfully, as his arm snaps back from the recoil.

The bullet itself goes through his folded leg at the thigh making two entry wounds and two exit wounds above and below the knee before travelling into the android's abdomen.

The pressure on his throat is released instantly but Rennin's body is a twisted ruin. He doesn't know or care where the android is anymore. He is going into shock. As he loses consciousness, images of Caufmann wrestling Prototype at the lab entrance flash through his mind.

Fuck it. Rennin gives in to the blackness.

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The crowd is getting rowdy, Pharaoh Drake thinks, as be bludgeons his way through. His six-man squad was forced to split up to look for the progenitor-class after its reading was lost a short while ago.

Drake checks his heads up display. Before dispatch, Caufmann equipped Drake with a tracker for Rennin's glasses, in case of the Prototype's reading being lost. They have been secretly tasked as his backup in case he actually found the thing.

Constant requests for details regarding their mission fell on deaf ears. Caufmann refused to share anything with the Beta HolinMech team. Drake only knows that Rennin Farrow has been taken into the Godyssey Head of Research's confidence.

Initially, Drake's unit stood guard around the club Starsprite. It was the last place Rennin was seen, and coincidentally the same general direction as the android's now faded signal.

A shot rings out. Familiarity prompts Drake's military training to kick in automatically. The unusual mix of fog and rain defuse the sound, making the location difficult to determine. The bustling masses don't seem to notice. *They probably think it is fireworks. But that was definitely a high calibre round.*

A second shot sounds, which starts Drake jogging towards Starsprite. The bouncers make a move to intercept, but Drake's

readied assault rifle, and a hand gesture towards the HolinMech emblem on the shoulder of his fatigues allow him to pass without incident.

The reading from Rennin's glasses directs Drake upstairs, so he leaps three steps at a time towards the blasting music. He enters the dance and bar area where people are looking completely smashed and totally oblivious. They don't seem to notice him since he's wearing black. A couple of them see the rifle but these people appear difficult to intimidate; he even gets a wink from someone he's not sure he should be attracted to. Another shot—barely audible—registers to him and his focus is renewed.

The reading is suddenly behind him. He turns to see the entrance to the toilets, and moves into them quickly. The toilet is too small, though he knows Rennin is somewhere in this general direction. The reading comes from much farther out than this little area.

Taking a moment to survey the room he soon spots the broken stall door and the open window. The reading in the glasses suddenly vanishes. He launches himself through the opening onto the roof, rifle at the ready. After taking a moment to secure his position, he starts moving quickly.

"All units this is Four-Niner, I'm on the rooftops of Starsprite and need backup immediately. White Rabbit may be down."

"Copy, Four-Niner, exact location?" It is Serro Hopper's voice, Drake's immediate superior.

"Come down on my transmission. Out."

He cuts off the communicator and heads over the roof as fast as he can, scanning both left and right with his weapon, maintaining a steady aim. Drake runs over several of the rooftops before seeing a figure clutching its abdomen, approaching the far edge of the local roofing system.

"Contact! Android!" Drake calls into the com-unit and opens fire, taking three shots.

The first two miss but the third strikes the construct in the right shoulder blade throwing it forwards and off the roof.

Drake hears a loud smash and a few people crying out in surprise at street level. He runs across to peer over the edge, in time to see the android rolling off the wreck of a car to begin limping up the street.

"Target marked, heading west of Block G, looks wounded."

Several acknowledgements come back to him from the other units. Drake is about to find a way down, when he hears a moan of pain. He swings around but sees nothing. He climbs up to the nearest roof peak to see a bloodied, mangled, mess of a man lying next to a gaping hole in the steel roof that is getting bigger as he watches.

"I need a medic at my transmission location immediately, White

Rabbit is down, confirmed."

"Copy, forty-nine, a gunship is en route and almost there. Is he alive?"

"Affirmative. Not for long, though, target did a number on him but it looks like he managed to shoot it. Both his arms are broken, his left leg has been shot up and the left side of his head is crushed."

"I'll advise the medic. Out."

Barely a moment later, the gunship is overhead and lowering across Drake's field of vision. The down draft increases to a gale as the craft that looks more like one of the old days helicopters than a gunship begins to settle a mere metre above the peak of the roof. It has two main fusion engines midway down the oval shaped body of the craft with a wing extending out from each that hold the main cannons and missile launchers. There are four small stabilizer engines on the bottom and top of the gunship to give it incredible stability.

When the rear access opens up, two medical soldiers jump out with a stretcher. Without speaking to Drake they stabilise Rennin and load the remainder of him onto the gunship. Drake is about to board when he hears more gunfire, this time from street level. Silence falls for a moment, before the screams erupt again.

From the rooftops, Drake can see the crowd in the street below flooding away from a lone gunman. Drake pulls a scope from a pouch in his vest and snaps it to his rifle. The figure is in police uniform, his face crazed and distorted. On the move now, he is firing constantly in one direction. Serro's voice comes over his com-unit, "All units, arrest the shooter at the top end of Main Road."

Mia Saker, Beta HolinMech sniper, responds. "Arrest? Why can't we take him out?"

"I have a clear shot from here," says Drake.

"We have orders not to kill, he's a police inspector. Peter Stanner. The target he's chasing is the Priority One."

Drake jumps in the gunship as it starts to lift off. "Pilot, land me near the gunman!"

"Yes, sir," says the pilot. The medics grumble to each other as the craft banks down towards the street.

The crowd is pure chaos. There is no escape due to the sheer volume of people trying to flee. A full-blown stampede is imminent. When the craft gets two metres from the surface Drake gauges the height.

Close enough, he thinks dropping the remainder of the way.

He makes his way straight towards the shooter, who has just reloaded and is firing on the run. There are at least a dozen bodies that he's shot dead, collateral damage from whoever he's aiming at. "Four-Niner, we have to make a perimeter to hold the crowd in the

immediate area."

"Negative! This guy is shooting *through* them. If we hold them in it'll be a massacre."

"It's an executive order, Four-Niner. Priority One is in that cluster of people."

Drake shakes his head. Whether it's an executive order or not Drake is going to take this lunatic out. He is getting close enough to the shooter to hear his raving.

The crowd push and shove past, knocking him about from time to time in their mad rush to escape. The shouting and screaming gets louder. Drake guesses some of them have found the blockade preventing them from leaving the area.

Drake gets clear of the crowd and can see the gunman loading another clip into his pistol. "Drop it!" yells Drake loud enough to drown out the cries of the fleeing crowd.

Stanner turns to face him. "It's going to escape! The infiltrator! Caufmann brought it in!" he yells, raising the gun at the crowd again.

"Do not fire! I *will* put you down!"

"It's got to die!" another shot rings out, another cry of pain from a bystander. Another death.

Drake curses himself for following the arrest order and fires off a round that hits Stanner in the stomach, throwing him off his feet. The weapon leaves his hands. Drake slings his rifle, takes out his sidearm, and stalks towards Stanner.

Stanner is clutching his stomach with one hand while attempting to rant about the android through moans of agony, his free hand clutching desperately towards his weapon. "Forty-nine, the target is subdued, stand down."

"Copy, target will be put down," answers Drake coldly, squeezing round out. It completely pulverises the hand questing for the gun.

"Negative, *negative*, forty-nine! Check your fire and stand down!"

"Copy, sir, standing down," says Drake, satisfied with himself.

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The badly wounded progenitor-class stumbles up the alleyway clutching the wound the watchman has given it. The shot from the Beta HolinMech soldier on the roof was easily absorbed, but Rennin's shot is the problem.

The android isn't accustomed to being wounded. Its knees would buckle but it doesn't have the same concept of weakness as a human. It leans against a wall, peeling back its overcoat to examine its wound. It is widening by the minute.

Its diagnostic system doesn't know what to make of it or how to deal with it. The android's immunity programming can combat it somewhat; but closing the wound is sacrificing a vast proportion of its power to keep the corrosive nano-virus in check.

It stoops, vomiting a thick brownish-purple substance onto the ground.

'Viral body purged. Repeat in four hours.'

The progenitor-class briefly rues its singularity. Being so unique makes it impossible to repair or replace its frame. It is at risk of rapidly dissolving should it need to divert its attention. It knows it would have to find another unit like itself to cannibalise. No such thing exists that's worth the risk and it would be contaminated instantly upon implementation. Caufmann must have designed this toxin as soon as he took readings during their brief encounter.

None of that matters now. All Caufmann needed to do was get records of the Isfeohrad Project from the Iyatoya lunar base. The android is sure the good Doctor knows its name.

Perhaps it isn't exactly a name. Perhaps it is more of a designation. The progenitor-class doesn't know, nor does it care. Many androids had names during the war. Names mean nothing.

Isfeohrad grimaces as genuinely as any sentient. According to its calculations it can sustain itself with an oral purge every four hours to expel the focussed plasma of the oxidizing agent that has become devastatingly virulent.

It will also need to constantly monitor the progression of its condition and keep cleaning out its blood through a filtering machine similar to dialysis every so often. The contagion level of the virus seems to be null and specific only to the system type it's infected and reacted to. *So this oxidizing agent will be contagious to all progenitor-class androids.*

Like all viruses that have become accustomed to an environment, it will react far more harshly if passed to another.

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It could be hours, days or years later. Rennin has lost all concept of time. He sometimes sees flashes of light that look like hospital lights.

There are surgeons all around him but he could be inside a bar or anywhere. Not that it matters to him. The pain is too intense to concentrate on such piffling details as where he is. He hears people speaking, but he can't quite understand them, even in his fleeting moments of consciousness.

He is absolutely broken in mind and spirit, and being this vulnerable isn't one of his strong points. Dreams of work, the war, his childhood running in the park and other kaleidoscopic images that strobe past, making no sense, haunt him.

It forms a terrible self-perpetuating spiral of pain and fear.

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Caufmann is standing over the ruination of Rennin Farrow, looking at him in bewilderment.

His most talented Godyssey surgeon, secondary only to Jellan Roths, Talati Hillon has taken control of Horizon Hospital's Intensive Care Unit.

Hillon completes her initial visual inspection of her new patient. It does not inspire confidence. "What the hell happened to him?"

Caufmann is unresponsive.

"William. He was armed to the teeth and all his clothing is fully armoured. What could have caused this amount of trauma?"

"Rennin was on assignment, the nature of which is classified."

"He's going to lose his right arm from the elbow, and almost his entire left leg. The femur and tibia are both shattered by the same bullet. Whatever crushed his wrist did a perfect job, especially so to get through his gauntlet. He is wearing CryoZaiyon Standard issue gear. If it wasn't for the armour-weave in the collar of his jacket, whatever gripped his throat would have torn his head off."

"I agree, the kit was inadequate," Caufmann concedes, inwardly chiding himself for underestimating the Isfeohrad Prototype.

"It's obvious that this was done by an android but progenitor-classes don't have the hardware required to inflict this kind of damage," Hillon says.

Caufmann smiles condescendingly, "And how many progenitor-class androids have you had experience with?"

"I'm the only one aiding your construction of Del, so I had to do a lot of study. Progenitor units weren't constructed with metacarpal pistons, therefore they don't have the ability to crush bone to this extent."

"It's clearly been weaponised. But how and where are questions for another time. Rennin is our immediate concern. He's the only one who has had any contact with it. The glasses I gave him recorded some verbal interaction, but the rain distorted what was said. I *must* know what he learned."

Hillon nods knowingly, "Ah, that explains everything."

"Do we have all the parts required?"

“Well, yes, but not for his skull. The left side of his head is collapsed. I believe this to be a waste of resources. Also the weight of the parts we’re using are a serious concern. His frame won’t be able to support it.”

“That’s why I have this,” says Caufmann producing a syringe. In the glass tube a pearlescent fluid is visible.

Hillon’s eyes widen in wonder, “Is that what I think it is?”

Caufmann nods.

“*Real* Thermosteel plasma?”

Caufmann nods again.

“May I?” she asks holding out her hand. Caufmann passes it to her cautiously. She wraps her hand around the glass tube. “It really does generate heat. The synthesized stuff doesn’t do that. This one lives up to its name. Where did you get it?”

“It was painstaking to acquire.”

“What are you going to do with it? There’s not a lot there,” Hillon asks.

“This amount is sufficient.”

“Would you waste what’s possibly the last of the rarest substance in the world on anyone else?” she asks, handing the needle back to him.

Caufmann places a hand against Rennin’s swollen, bleeding, face in a paternal way. “No. I told him to do something, he did it, and nearly died for it. I ordered him not to engage the target unless he was absolutely sure of success but a true soldier doesn’t know how to fail. I can’t say the same for myself. I spend my time in the lab butchering test subject after test subject in the name of saving more lives, but what has that wrought?”

“But, sir—”

“Stop!” he looks at her fiercely. “Thus far, I have only killed people; *hundreds* of people!”

“Keep your voice down!”

“They all know what I’ve done! Everyone knows! They lack the courage to oust us from this city, plain and simple. I haven’t actually saved *one* life during my time here, with my own hands. I am going to save him. I’m going to save *one!*”

Caufmann and Hillon waste no more time talking. They work for days, in fourteen-hour shifts rebuilding what’s left of Rennin Farrow’s body. The right arm is amputated at the elbow, replaced with a biomechanical arm similar to the military grade HolinMechs.

His left leg is removed at the hip. The hip joints and lower back are reinforced with Thermosteel plasma to handle the extra weight of the android leg.

Rennin is kept in a semiconscious state throughout most of the

surgery, as an overload of anaesthetic would kill him. The work on his head is also extremely delicate, requiring him to respond with each minute adjustment.

Every now and then he'd be present enough to cry out in pain and during the installation of his arm he became fully aware long enough to see his skinless andronic limb. Despite being dosed up again, Caufmann is sure he passed out from shock. His left arm is easy by comparison, and only needs to be reset in position and put in a cast.

The skull plates are installed last, after a day of rest to let him recuperate a little after the brain surgery. Prototype's blow did far more damage than they expected.

Afterwards, all they can do is wait. Caufmann has never performed a human conversion to android, not even a partial one and after exiting the operating room he throws up. He's never thrown up before either, as far as he can recall. But his memories aren't always consistent.

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Rennin wakes up with a jolt and sits up almost on reflex. His body feels strange, out of balance somehow. One of his eyes is held shut by something he finds to be a bandage, securely wrapped around his head.

He's very off centre, but otherwise feels fantastic. He looks to his left arm to find it is being fed by a morphine drip. Which makes him wonder why he's so full of energy. He swings his legs over the edge of his gurney, tries to stand, and falls straight over.

He lands flat on his face, bringing the saline drip down with him, and tearing out the morphine line. He grunts in irritation, rips the saline drip out, and tries standing again but inexplicably feels like he's balancing on a tightrope.

A surgeon comes in and jumps at seeing him up. "Mister Farrow, get back in bed right now!"

Rennin can't believe it but he's genuinely pleased to see this person. He smiles broadly, "I'm not five years old and I'm fairly sure, due to your absence of facial hair, that you're not my mother."

"Mister Farrow, I've been charged with overseeing your recovery and you're not due to be out of here for another week."

Rennin freezes, "*Another* week? How long have I been here?"

"Nine days currently. You underwent drastic surgery, you can't be out and about."

Rennin's grin turns predatory, "I feel great."

"You need another week of recuperation."

A flash group of images enter Rennin's mind of Caufmann's face and an injection of something burningly hot at the base of his spine followed by a blinding wave of pain before blacking out again.

Rennin looks hard at the surgeon, "I'm leaving."

"No you're not."

Rennin takes a heavy step forward on his left leg and glares down at the doctor who is a clear foot shorter. "If I've been here nine days then it's October the 2nd, yes?"

"Yes."

"You know what that means?"

"No."

"I'm at *least* two-hundred and sixteen hours late for work," and with that, Rennin leaves.

Barely a minute later, Rennin is walking up the street feeling fresh as a daisy. He's still in his hospital gown but he's got his pants on, at least. He's carrying the rest of his armour-weave clothing in a bag, along with everything else he had on him the night of the rally.

The watchman decides that he will wear it to work. His armour-weave gear is black, just like his work uniform. He feels far too confident for someone straight out of hospital. Though when he thinks about the bandage on his head a grim thought occurs to him.

He promptly ducks into the nearest restaurant and hears an alarm buzz once but takes no heed. Stepping up to the coffee machine, he asks for a latte before walking straight for the restrooms, ignoring the strange looks from the two serving staff.

Rennin steps up to the basin to examine himself closely in the mirror. The upper left section of his face is obscured with bandages. The eye he can see looks normal. Normal for him at least; it's still grey shot through with violet.

Good start.

Slowly raising his hands, Rennin unwraps his head to see what's beneath.

Come on, be normal. When the bandages fall away he finds that's not so. His left eye is shot through with violet, as expected, but the rest of the iris is shining with a bright gold, glittering like a tiny star with a black centrepoint.

His scrutiny of himself increases, magnified to the point where he does notice a few irregularities with his head. The section covered by the bandage looks almost too perfect. His cheekbone is well defined, and the form of his forehead on that side looks as if carved by an artist.

It would be unnoticeable to anyone who isn't as aware of their visage as he is, he constantly checks himself for any signs of decrepitude daily and knows himself well.

He presses his face, kneading through the skin for anything unusual. *It all feels normal. No, wait…that isn't right…*

A join line. He presses further, gaining the distinct impression that this line is some kind of seam. He follows it with his fingers up his temple and around the top of his head, and down the middle of his forehead.

Another look at the golden left eye brings it home. That whole section of his head is fake, moulded, and installed like a faulty vehicle part.

Perhaps Prototype smashed him up worse than he thought, even though he swears he could still see with both eyes after taking that hit to the head. Unless he was seeing double with one eye.

Then he remembers bracing his leg against Prototype's chest and firing through it to get to that disgusting android. No one walks on a leg that's been shot through in only nine days. It's completely unheard of even with all the medical miracles of the modern age.

The door to the toilets begins to open but Rennin slams it shut again, wedging his foot against it.

"Give me a minute!"

A moment of panic, and his pants are down. Rennin looks at his leg. It is in perfect condition without even a scar on it. Like in his face, the bones look ever so slightly more defined, sharper somehow, especially around the kneecap. He feels around his hip, the bone is more prominent than before. He pulls his pants up quickly, reaching into his bag for his singlet, and notices his right hand.

He remembers seeing it skinless for just a second during his operation. He has to blink the image away then looks closely at each hand by holding them up next to each other. The right is perfect and that is not comforting in the least. His knuckles, fingers, wrist and even his fingernails look engineered and the bones look sharper just like in his forehead and leg.

He looks up to the mirror to his glowing left eye and a fierce frown cross his face even though he looks ten years younger.

Rennin walks out of the toilets fully dressed in his armour-weave with his face set in stone. The staff at the counter have made his latte, and hand it to him cautiously. He doesn't acknowledge them but takes the drink, throwing a bunch of notes at them before striding out oblivious to another buzz from the door alarm.

After a few odd glances from passers-by, he pulls his hood up trying to hide his glowing eye. His bulky form itself draws enough attention. He knows he stands out, but despite trying to stay alert and paranoid he can't help feeling fantastic.

It is all he can do to not grin maniacally.

He checks his watch to find it's almost lunchtime so continues on

his way to the Godyssey Lab. He realises that he's walking heavier on his left foot than his right. It's giving him the appearance of a limp. *I'll worry about that later when Caufmann is in my sights.*

He can't help but notice the streets are unusually full of people. He remembers that Caufmann ordered the schools closed after the rally. It certainly explains the rampant younglings running around, hopped up on goofballs or whatever it is that keeps them from seeing their own pitiful existence in Technicolor.

Finally reaching the lab he pauses at the gate. Looking across the courtyard and up at his tower, he wonders who has been covering for him. *Probably Wanker.* Rennin turns around and looks across the street to the Perseverance bar.

Haven't seen Carla for a while. His eyes flick back toward the lab briefly. *They've lasted over a week without me, they can last until tomorrow.*

Rennin enters the bar. The place is deserted apart from Carla. She must be just starting her shift because she looks like she just woke up. The weapon alarm arc over the door buzzes, startling her slightly; her look of shock quickly turns to anger. "Where have you been?"

"In hospital."

She looks him up and down and rolls her eyes. "Bullshit," she resumes wiping the bar top, "Get out."

He walks up to the bar and displays his left wrist. It is still wrapped with a hospital identification tag. "See?"

She grabs his arm and has a closer look. "This says the emergency surgery wing," she says, looking him over anxiously. "Exactly what happened to you?" she asks running her hand along the dried blood staining his hood.

He unveils his head showing his face, his new artificial eye, and his arm, telling her selected highlights of how he incurred his injuries, strategically leaving out the particular details of the android and what he remembers of the surgery. "So there you have it."

Her face is horrified. She places both his hands on the bar top to look at the differences. "My god…" she runs her fingers along the knuckles of his right hand.

"And this," he says putting her hand to his face. He gently presses her fingers along the bone seam in his forehead.

Her mouth falls ajar in shock. "I'm sorry, Rennin, I had no idea and when you swaggered in looking perfectly healthy—"

"It's alright," he cuts her off.

She comes around to the other side of the bar and hugs him. "You don't have much luck, do you, Trigger?"

5.
Unrest

It's been a week since Rennin left the hospital and nothing has happened. Nothing *interesting,* as far as Rennin is concerned. Work has been dreary, with Caufmann spending more time in the restricted section than anywhere else.

He glances over to Wanker. He's been reassigned to the clock tower, continuing to keep an eye on the place just as he was while Rennin was being rebuilt in Horizon Hospital. Rennin emits an exaggerated sigh. Wanker pays no heed, so Rennin takes another look at his watch.

"Nice bracelet," says Wanker.

"You can't buy style."

"Can't afford it, you mean."

I wonder when I can get out of this hole and into bed with Carla. Just like he has spent every night this week.

The bone irregularities are spreading across his entire body, more by the day. First it was just his artificial limbs that were showing an odd sharpness and symmetry in the bone structure, but it's been spreading outwards from there like some kind of weed.

The seam in his forehead has sealed over and disappeared. Most of his head is showing the odd distinctiveness now, as is his entire right arm, most of his right leg and his spine. He's tried to contact Caufmann but hasn't managed to reach him.

He taps his foot nervously and tries to relax, but he can't.

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William Caufmann is standing behind his desk. He's in his office for the first time in days, gripping the bridge of his nose fiercely. Mepida Rethrin, Talati Hillon and a sickly Jellan Roths stand in a line opposite the doctor.

He takes a wheezing breath that sounds like air forced through a spinning fan. "It's a good thing, don't you see?" he says without a hint of pleading.

Roths responds instantly, "How could this *possibly* be construed as a good thing?" she almost yells.

Rethrin nods her head, "It's loose in the streets, we all but have an outbreak on our hands."

"I'm well aware of the situation, but the outbreak pattern is

what's interesting," says Caufmann.

"It's completely random, William," says Hillon in a softer tone that stinks of defeat to Caufmann.

"The vaccinations failed, we know that. I know that. But they succeeded in an unexpected way."

Roths scoffs, "Because a handful are immune?"

"Not so much immune or immunized, more than that. Cured."

Rethrin looks sceptical, "Cured?"

"Try to use those million-dollar minds for just a moment, please. The people already infected with the B-DNA no longer show any symptoms of infection, but there's a flipside."

The three stand waiting.

Caufmann continues, "The people who weren't infected at the time of Project Outreach are now twice as susceptible and will mutate exponentially faster."

Roths lets out a bitter laugh, "And you still see an upside?"

Caufmann's inhuman glare fixes on her. "The toxin resets the evolutionary progress to zero, awaiting instruction. It completely isolates the mutagen in the B-DNA and all secondary exposure turns up nothing. They're immune. Whereas the others who are exposed to the virus after the inoculation also have their evolutionary clock reset, and once the mutagen latches onto the nervous system—that's already awaiting instruction on how to grow—all hell breaks loose."

Hillon sighs, "We're finished."

"Twenty percent of the population can be saved and we will save them. There are no hostiles out yet, but within a week that will all change. Martial Law will be put in place in a few days."

"The city is too big, we'd need an army! Not mention the questions we're getting since we restricted travel."

"There will be a safe zone for the uncontaminated built in the Centre-city District, and the addresses of the immune will be made known to you."

"How can you possibly know which ones are or aren't infected?" asks Rethrin.

"By accessing the same nano-implants that Primus used to choose it's CryoZaiyon candidates: Embryon Protocol."

After a short silence Hillon speaks up, "Why not send out another shipment of the antigen? Stop the virus dead in its tracks."

"There is none left to ship. Not nearly on the scale required. A few hundred vials, maybe."

"And I suppose they are reserved," Roths almost spits.

Rethrin speaks in more of an outburst of sound, "Then what do we do?"

Caufmann notices his glasses on the desk flashing, indicating

someone is using electronic equipment just outside his office. He looks at Rethrin, “When the hostile contaminants emerge, we shoot them. The main priority will be to protect the fortified zone,” he says moving around his desk towards the door in vast strides.

It flies up and Caufmann is outside in an instant spotting Gainsford, just a glimpse of him shoving something in his pocket.

Spying.

Caufmann contains his anger behind an emotionless mask. “Yes?”

Gainsford takes a step back. “I-I need to speak with you.”

“Come back later.”

“Yes, sir, I’m sorry,” he says turning and walking off briskly.

Caufmann watches him walk away with burning eyes that glow all too brightly in contrast to his dark sockets. He opens a channel with the tower on his forearm gauntlet, “Ren?”

Almost instantly, Rennin’s voice answers, “Copy.”

“Gainsford will be exiting the lab any minute. Take him out.”

There is a moment of pause.

“Yes, sir.”

In the tower Rennin loads his sniper rifle thinking about his last altercation with Gainsford. He isn’t entirely sure what the man could have done to earn a death sentence. Surely Gainsford isn’t smart enough to be a traitor or extortionist.

Rennin’s face is pensive as he slides in the firing pin, oblivious to Wanker until he gets a slap on the shoulder.

“Hey, dickhead, you listening?”

“I have things to do,” answers Rennin.

“Are you *actually* going to shoot him?” Wanker says, his jowls shaking indignantly.

Rennin glances over at the overweight, aging, fattening, balding man-child sitting next to him. “Don’t get worked up, Slabs of Flab, your heart won’t take the stress as well as the weight of your ample bosom.”

Wanker frowns and almost looks threatening. “You’re making jokes when you’re about to shoot somebody?”

“I’m not making jokes, God made you, it’s *his* joke.”

“Listen to me, Rennin!”

“God having a sense of humour almost got me to go back to Church,” he says now in autopilot, his emotions locked in an airtight coffin until the deed is done.

“Caufmann is nuts, man, just don’t do it. Or miss.”

“I never miss,” he pulls the bolt back loading a round into the chamber, then clicks it forwards ready to fire.

Wanker shakes his head and grits his teeth.

“Contact,” says Rennin as Michael Gainsford, the walking dead, leaves the building and is visible in the courtyard below. He hasn’t said ‘contact’ upon seeing an enemy since the war but Gainsford isn’t an enemy, just a target.

Just a target.

He takes aim.

“Don’t do it,” pleads Wanker.

Gainsford is almost halfway across the courtyard when the floodlights come on, drenching everything in a white haze. His brisk walk pauses midstride. He takes another resigned step then halts entirely.

Rennin is about to pull the trigger when he notices that Gainsford doesn’t move, he doesn’t shield his eyes, he doesn’t run. He just stands there with his head down and eyes closed.

The watchman freezes for a moment, taking stock of the man he thought was an idiot, accept his fate with courage. Gainsford has guts Rennin didn’t know he had. He takes a sharp breath, with a frown crossing his face as he pulls the trigger.

The gun’s blast seems infinitely louder than usual and the bullet hits Gainsford in the side of the head, throwing him off his feet. Rennin doesn’t watch the body land he just drops his rifle on the floor and sits down next to his co-worker without any expression at all.

His colleague says something but Rennin doesn’t even hear him. He falls into a kind of physical torpor. He hasn’t felt like this is a long, long time. He doesn’t feel bad, but there is a cripplingly distinct absence of anything good.

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Caufmann is in the experimental lab, deep in the bowels of Godyssey, when interrupted by a call from security. Rennin has attacked his secretary outside his office. By all accounts, the watchman had told his secretary repeatedly to summon the doctor back from the restricted section. Her refusal to do so did not end well.

She is a very difficult woman to deal with at the best of times, which is one of her best features. As official guard of Caufmann’s schedule, her tendency to be dismissive definitely has major perks. Despite being universally hated by all of Caufmann’s staff, she is good at her job. But according to the security team, Rennin hit her, and not softly.

If he hit her with his right hand the damage would be horrendous.

Caufmann mentally curses himself for not having the time to take Rennin aside after his surgery.

The man must be a mess.

His obsession with Rennin's survival and successful reconstruction was mainly driven by his need for details on his encounter with Prototype. Though, as usual, other matters have gotten in the way. He'll get the information he needs sooner or later. The glasses Rennin had that night were damaged and didn't record anything useful.

In the hallway to his office, he sees a splatter of blood across the floor near his secretary's desk. He sighs and shakes his head but picks up the pace. *This isn't what I expected to deal with as Head of Research.* Behind the desk, some of his staff are comforting his secretary.

She's not bruised. As far as Caufmann can tell she hasn't been touched, but his relief is tainted by a massive dent in the steel desk.

It makes some sense now, Rennin must have lost his temper and punched the desk, she then called security. He blinks wearily and asks where Rennin is.

Entering his office, Caufmann finds Rennin handcuffed onto one of the seats facing his desk, head tilted to one side. Blood is dripping off his face onto the floor. Caufmann shakes his head, and steps around to get a better look. Rennin has a nasty bruise swelling just above his left temple.

Caufmann leans in, and the watchman's eyes flutter open. He steps back a bit to give Rennin a little space. Rennin's pupils are unusually dilated, and his movement is groggy. *I think I'll be having a little chat with my security staff.*

"William…" Rennin manages to croak.

All the years working in his employ Rennin has never called him William. They must have really hit him hard. "Are you alright?"

"I'm not sure if I…" he takes a breath, "deserved the baton."

Caufmann doesn't say anything.

"What did you do to me?"

Caufmann tilts his head questioningly.

"My bones…" he sighs and closes his eyes as if they weigh a tonne.

"Are you sure you don't want to ask another time, when you'll remember?"

"Do I have a concussion?"

"It seems you have been hit on the armoured section of your skull. Your brain may well have been shaken."

"But not stirred," Rennin says with a weak smile.

"I'll see to it that you're patched up. Take a day off."

Rennin's smile vanishes. "What is happening to my body? The

weird bone thing is spreading," he says, his voice taking a serious tone.

Caufmann takes a breath. "There was a lot of damage and you lost a lot of blood, we had to do something drastic. You almost died. Your body suffered serious trauma and you had a grievous head wound."

"What did you *do*?" he asks, slowly leaning forwards. He looks very awkward, trying to move while handcuffed in place.

"We implanted two combat-grade limbs, your entire left leg and your right arm from the elbow. Part of your skull needed to be replaced and your left eye was damaged, easier to replace than fix."

Rennin takes a moment to process that, but handles it quite well. "So why is the bone definition spreading? At this rate I'll cut myself on my own cheekbones."

Caufmann breaks eye contact briefly and blinks. "Like I said, we had to do something drastic. With no living next of kin and your incapacitation, I took the liberty of choosing for you."

Rennin looks up at him with mildly clearer eyes.

"We injected you with Thermosteel plasma."

Rennin stiffens, becoming absolutely still. The memory of something agonisingly hot stabbing into the base of his spine recurs, and is difficult to blink away.

"The combat-grade limbs are far too heavy for a standard human skeleton to support, so we had to reinforce it. The organic components of Thermosteel make it ideal; it is designed to make bones stronger. It's just spreading across your entire skeleton. That was not meant to happen. I'm sorry to say, I didn't know enough about the substance," Caufmann continues.

Rennin blinks several times before hauling himself to his feet, dragging the chair up with him, "You injected me with a bone grafting plasma that spreads like a virus."

Caufmann is finding his remorse most unwelcome and uncommon.

"I'm sorry, Ren, but you would have died. Or been incapable of supporting your new limbs."

"Well it's shit."

Caufmann doesn't respond.

"My head still hurts like *hell*," he says before a smirk crosses his face.

Caufmann smiles, "Thermosteel plasma is in extremely short supply and it did save your life."

"Why not use regular andronic limbs? Not that I'm complaining," says Rennin looking better by the moment.

Caufmann's expression returns to an uncomfortable kind of

neutral.

"You'll need them."

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Rennin wakes up the next morning feeling unusually bad.

Psychologically he feels just as enthusiastic as he did when he woke up in the hospital a week before. And apart from when he shot Gainsford, he has felt equally good emotionally every day since, for absolutely no reason. Today though, he feels physically sick.

Rennin drank a lot last night, as he does most nights, but this is a whole new level of hangover. His vision is slightly split, he can't keep track of his thoughts, and his entire body feels like it's being hollowed out from within.

He rolls over expecting to find Carla, but she's not in the bed. Which is severely concerning as he's usually a *very* light sleeper.

The watchman swings his legs off the bed. The motion makes his head swim, pulling the world out from under him briefly.

Rennin hears vomiting from the bathroom, which drags his concentration back to the present. He takes a few faltering steps before managing an off kilter stagger to the bathroom, to find Carla on her knees in front of the toilet. Her skin is extremely pale. "Puking first thing in the morning. You pregnant?" he asks.

She huffs out a hacking laugh, "You're so sensitive and considerate."

Rennin slumps down next to her. Her face is ashen, and her darkened sockets make her eyes look unnaturally bright. "Can I get you anything?"

"A priest," she says.

He smiles but notices the veins on her neck and temples are severely darkened, almost black. "Well if you hadn't noticed I am a devout kitchen."

She blinks at him, "Christian, I think you mean."

"You *hope*. Seriously, do you want some water?"

"If you would pay attention I've been trying to reach it but my head won't go down far enough."

"Never had that problem before."

She mockingly backhands his face, exaggerating the effort required. "Smart arse."

Rennin goes to the kitchen to make some coffee for her when a sharp pain runs up the side of his head. He closes his eyes and focuses on making coffee, trying to distract himself from the sudden surge of pain.

When the fog in his mind clears he readies the coffee. He drops the small brown cube into a cup, adds a spoon full of old fashioned sugar, milk extract and water. He brings it into the bathroom and leaves it on the basin within arms reach.

After dressing, he says his goodbyes to Carla, who smiles weakly in response. Rennin limps out of the house still unaccustomed to his heavy, combat-grade prosthetics. The leg particularly has been difficult to adapt to. It moves under its own power, but it pulls on his spine with each step.

He reckons in another day or so the Thermosteel will have spread through his entire body causing the protruding look to his bones to appear everywhere. He is a little disappointed that it didn't add the same symmetry to his left hand that his right hand now possesses, but Thermosteel can't fix genetics.

An hour into his shift at the lab Rennin bursts into the toilet and throws up before even reaching the bowl. It is mostly bile but it's streaked with a fair amount of blood.

Righty, he notes before stumbling over to the sink to wash his face.

The cool water does soothe the sick feeling somewhat, but he feels like someone drained his blood and filled him up with formaldehyde. *And dog piss.*

His whole body feels like it's shutting down, waves of numbness manifesting randomly all over his body. He looks at himself in the mirror, *I swear I look even worse than I did this morning*. His real eye is paler, the pupil looking less distinct, almost hazy somehow. He throws up again in the sink before feeling his knees buckle. There's a splitting pain in his spine, and the world turns dark.

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Del sits in the Chair.

The relic from over two decades ago is for use when androids are offline, in order to update and improve programming; in this case by Caufmann and Doctor Hillon. The skull plate across the back of Del's head has been removed, replaced by thick cables that snake upwards to the wall behind, feeding into a mainframe designed to recalibrate and install.

Hillon rubs her eyes in exhaustion, "This android is never going to work if it has to be mind-wiped every day and restored to factory settings just to function at a basic level."

"I'm aware of that, thank you," says Caufmann.

Hillon hands him a page of Transfilm, a holographic printout on a

transparent blue sheet. “Look at this. I’ve never seen so much ghost-code form in an android so quickly, he’ll need to be constantly maintained.”

“Not if we get his algorithms in order.”

“Exactly how are you going to do that in the foreseeable future?”

“Just by keeping at it,” says Caufmann.

“Del has made an interesting first attempt but it’s time to move on to another experiment. Is Adrenin ready?”

“No. Adrenin is still in the birth-pod. I’m attempting to program him while he’s growing to see if it’s more successful. At the moment I’m inclined to believe it is better. I should not have removed Del from the capsule so early.”

“What about the Suvaco Program? Maybe those hybrid androids can provide some programming solutions,” says Hillon.

The Suvacoes have been in stasis since their discovery and that was quite a long time ago. Caufmann was hoping they could provide data to improve future generations of androids. So far, with no success.

Caufmann grumbles, “I have no idea. Their encryptions are so invasive I can’t even get basic information out of them. As far as I can tell from their construct they’re a hive-mind unit.”

“How can you tell?”

“Those spikes that run up the centre of their heads aren’t just cosmetic. They are based on an insectile template, they are utilised to transmit signals. Since they are organic signals, we can’t intercept and decode them. Quite brilliant, really.”

“Are you ever going to tell me where you found them?”

“I didn’t find them. The HolinMech Warrior strike-team found them inactive. One of the androids had a seizure, so I’m told,” he says making a dismissive gesture, “and found an antechamber housing these units.”

Hillon’s face turns sceptical. “Found them *while* in seizure?”

“I know, it’s ridiculous.”

“Which unit was it?”

“A 22,000 series: Cain Hicks.”

“A twenty-two went into seizure?” she says in disbelief. “Cause?”

“Unknown. Either way, he found the Suvaco units and they were ordered to be shipped here.”

“I don’t like that at all.”

Caufmann nods in genuine concern, “Neither do I. I’ve put them in the most protected area available. If it’s locked down, no one should be able to get in or out.”

“You think they might activate?”

“Anything’s possible.”

Hillon looks at Del, “He doesn’t look much like a combat model slumped in that chair. I think whoever built the Suvacoes is a lot cleverer than we are.”

“Speak for yourself. I have taken various precautions, you know. I removed most of the heavy armour and several of the sensors around the cranial cap, so even if they do activate they’ll be far less effective than they otherwise would be, should they turn hostile.”

“Why not dismantle them?”

Caufmann smiles, “So much work went into them. I *have* to know how it was done. I’ve sabotaged them as much as I dare to and created several vulnerabilities in their framework.”

Hillon takes a steadying breath, “You cannot deny that cloning them may have been the worst idea you could possibly have had. The fruits of this work are one barely active, blind, android and a twin unit that is taking an ice age to gestate.

“The Suvacoes are part organic. Their programming could well be genetic. You may be making Del worse by trying to implement programs he simply isn’t designed to assimilate.

“More to the point, what if they were *left* there to find? And like the Trojans we may have brought the enemy within our walls.”

Caufmann shakes his head, “Ludicrous. No one leaves engineering this sophisticated behind to take a chance like that.”

“This fascination of yours may well be the death of you.”

“I’m not that lucky.”

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Rennin pulls himself off the floor, unsure of how long he’s been unconscious. It can’t have been extensive, since no one has found him. He coughs, and a splatter of blood hits the floor in front of him.

That’s not good.

Indigo Reign was the last thing that knocked him this hard, but the pain here and now is nowhere near as intense. Unfortunately, the energy drain it causes is incredible. He can work through a bad flu with a few painkillers and an Irish coffee but this is different, despite the usual body aches of a virus. He also has the nausea, the weakness, all the typical symptoms of flu but the symptoms are amplified a great deal more. This is something far from normal.

Exiting the bathroom, Rennin closes the door, and uses his andronic right hand to break the door latch. His sputum may be contagious, definitely for the best that no one comes in contact with it. Though looking around Wanker isn’t in the tower. Rennin wonders if he’s sick too.

He gets on his personal communicator, dialling Caufmann's link number. When the doctor answers Rennin lists his symptoms. Caufmann's reaction is almost undetectable. *Never a good thing.*

Minutes later, Rennin is slumped in a seat in Caufmann's office, his head resting in his hands, while the doctor examines a vial of his blood. Behind his desk, seated in his throne-like chair, Caufmann reminds Rennin more of a school principal than a scientist.

Caufmann's face in unreadable. *Another very bad sign.* "I have some bad news, Ren," he says.

"Bubonic Plague?"

Caufmann doesn't miss a beat, "Worse."

Rennin suppresses the urge to panic. His body has never let him down without outside interference. He can't find any way to respond.

Caufmann steps around to the other side of his desk with slow precise steps, stopping directly in front of Rennin. When he makes eye contact he speaks in a soft voice.

"You've suffered contamination from a mutagenic pathogen. It's gotten into your blood and will soon build up bacteria in your spinal column. It will latch onto the nerves and grow into tendrils that clone your central nervous system, developing into a parasitic life form.

"From there it will grow new veins within your veins and spread to your brain stem, but by that time you, as we know you, will be dead. Once the disease is that far advanced, you'll be a walking hungry puppet, a host for the thing you'll eventually grow into."

Rennin feels his head swim but it's not the sickness this time. "What-um, what thing?"

"Not to be melodramatic; a monster."

For Caufmann to use that particular word after all the horrible things Rennin's heard he's done is nothing short of catastrophic. "Did you build it?" Rennin asks feeling too overwhelmed, almost like the time he lost his virginity, complete with all the terror that brought.

Caufmann's face remains carved of stone, with a coldness that would freeze lava. "No. It's old. Very old."

"Where did it come from?"

Caufmann's face turns genuinely reminiscent, "A world far off, from outside the solar system. Completely artificial," his eyes start to glow brighter even though they glaze over as he stares off into a daydream. "I cannot remember exactly where anymore. Sometimes I'm unsure if I ever knew to begin with."

"That's what the progenitor-class said, before it attacked me," says Rennin staring at Caufmann's eyes. He can see the bioluminescence, if that's what it is, glowing behind his irises. It is not a healthy look. Rennin's artificial eye zooms in unexpectedly throwing his concentration for a moment but what he sees in Caufmann's eye

freezes him dead.

Visible for only an instant before the doctor moves his head, Caufmann's eye is blue. It must have been their original colour. Shining within the once blue irises are glowing spokes, cutting outwards from the pupil with finer lines crosshatching throughout. They look etched in as if someone has sliced into his eyes with tiny razorblades. What ever happened to them, it must have been painful.

"What else did it tell you?" asks Caufmann.

"That you're responsible."

Caufmann briefly smirks, not an expression Rennin has seen often. "If I could design things so intricate, I'd be a world shaper, not a Head of Research at Godyssey."

"But was it right about the Montrialis crew finding it?"

"It's very likely. It remains the only ship ever made that was capable of zero mass hyper-transit, rather than the regular Hytran engines we use now."

Rennin closes his eyes for a moment. "Can you please pretend, just for a moment, that you're *not* talking to a rocket scientist?"

Caufmann ignores him, "The ship did hit the projected speed, and did need to make an emergency landing. The rest you know. Android goes mad, crew killed, one survivor."

"And since you didn't build it, you can't cure it?"

"That depends," says Caufmann locking his strange eyes on Rennin. "Did you get vaccinated?"

"Yes."

Caufmann lowers his head, staring Rennin down.

"No," the watchman concedes.

Caufmann's mouth twists up in a grin but the rest of his face remains uncomfortably inanimate. "You are a stubborn one," he says, stepping behind Rennin.

"What—" Rennin is cut off, as Caufmann grabs his hair with one hand, his other arm wrapping around his neck. Rennin chokes out in surprise. He tries to struggle but the doctor's grip is like cold steel, without a hint of give.

A vice would be more forgiving.

The doctor forces Rennin's head to one side. An instant later he feels a jab in his neck. He cries out, only to discover he has been released.

"You'll recover in a few days," says Caufmann, returning to his seat. "This must be unique, that your stubbornness has paid off to your benefit. If you had have already been vaccinated I would have used a different syringe."

Rennin rubs his neck and coughs a little. "Simple as that? You could have just asked."

"You would have made a fuss. You hate needles."

How does he know that? "You penetrated me without even buying me a drink."

"I can see you're just flustered after being overpowered," Caufmann says. From his tone, Rennin isn't sure if he's joking. "Now… how did you get sick?"

An image of Carla puking enters his mind. "Do you have any more of that shit?"

Caufmann slumps slightly, "Your girlfriend?"

"No," he says quickly.

"Boyfriend?"

"*No*."

Caufmann smiles for a moment before returning to his serious expression. "Has she been vaccinated already?"

"I don't know."

"There isn't much left of the antigen, Rennin."

"I need it."

"I barely have enough left for a hundred lives. If I give it to you, you must be sure she's curable."

"I think she is, she's too hard-headed to get vaccinated for flu."

Caufmann's face isn't friendly. "For her sake, you'd best be right. Find out if she's been given the shot, then I'll give it to you."

Rennin thinks for a moment. "What do I do if she can't be cured?"

Caufmann's gaze remains fixed on his. "Best worry about that if or when it happens."

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Caufmann and Rennin part ways. Or at least the watchman leaves his office looking rather down. The chemical reaction occurring within his body will knock the stuffing out of him for a couple of days as his immune system fires up, combatting the disease. But he'll live.

He had better live.

Caufmann has been doing this job for what feels like centuries, slowly eroding his body and mind. Despite feeling like he's deteriorating, he knows it's all in his head because he's physically quite powerful.

For years Caufmann hasn't had company he's enjoyed or found all that interesting. He leans back, thinking of the horrors of the war and things he once called friends. He's lost so many, some he had to leave behind, either under orders or out of survival. In the many years since, Rennin Farrow is the only person he can honestly call his friend.

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Beta HolinMech are all aboard their gunship. Pharaoh Drake accompanies the unit, not at all comfortable with this assignment.

Serro Hopper sits opposite him, staring at him with those bright blue eyes. Drake glares back with his dark orbs, knowing how they intimidate Serro. It's easy to read people, especially when he can see their pupil dilations fluctuating.

Dark eyes aren't so easy to read.

"Nervous?" asks Serro.

Drake represses the urge to roll his eyes. His leg is twitching. "Who can be nervous? We're shooting unarmed civilians. There's no risk factor."

"They're dangerous."

"Not yet they're not."

The pilot's voice is transmitted over their headsets. "Ten seconds!"

Drake and the others ready themselves to disembark. The gunship's engines whine loudly as the shuttle settles atop an apartment complex.

They're in the Middle-city zone where the earliest infected have been registered through use of the outlawed Embryon Protocol.

"What the hell is the Embryon Protocol?" asks Drake.

Serro seems hesitant to respond. He briefly fidgets with the straps on his battle harness. "It's an old school registry."

"Gee I never would have guessed, thanks a lot, *sir,*" says Drake, irrepressibly frustrated.

Serro shakes his head, "It was the program used to select CryoZaiyon soldiers in the years leading up to the war."

"To *select* whom? How?"

"Embryon Protocol was originally a medical program used by hospitals to detect genetic defects in unborn children. Godyssey eventually used it to find… you know… candidates," Serro says with an uneasy smile.

Drake feels like he is missing something. "We're next in line to become androids, why do you look so uncomfortable?"

"We are volunteers," says Serro.

"Speak for yourself."

"Point is, that the original 'candidates' were all selected by computer. It's the shameful part of Godyssey's history that gave us Andron technology. The rumour is that most of the original experiments were on high profile athletes. Most of them apparently died in mysterious circumstances, were put on ice for decades until things died down, then they were converted," says Serro.

“Yeah, okay, I get the picture.”

According to Embryon data there are now dozens of targets that are dropping off the humanoid side of the scale and are succumbing quickly to whatever is loose in the city. Then they turn.

The targets Beta HolinMech will be confronting may or may not already be turned into the hostile organism officially labelled ‘Contaminant’; but they are to be executed regardless. No exceptions.

Beta HolinMech have been deployed into the most heavily infected population centre, whilst the Horizon Military are clearing less risky zones. Drake wonders how the future generations will remember this action. Apparently they’re preventing the spread of a deadly pathogen, but in his opinion they’re just a death squad.

A team of murderers.

Be all that you can be…

The gunship lands, the rear gangplank drops and the Beta HolinMechs file out by twos, in their assigned teams. Drake is with Serro as always. The two of them might as well be conjoined twins, attached at the hip.

The spring rain seems to have been locked in the on position at the Horizon weather station today. Drake could bet his right arm that it has been either raining or snowing for several weeks straight. *What’s the point in having a superior weather machine if it always makes the weather terrible?*

The team enter the building through the roof access, dispersing to their specified sections. Serro and Drake are on one of the lower floors. Since they don’t use lifts in these situations, all the units are taking the stairs. As they run down the others split off in pairs, and soon enough it’s only Serro and Drake left. Now alone, they head to their floor.

The pair take position at either side of the door to floor fourteen, catching their breath while waiting for the go command. After a moment, the deep resonating voice of Captain Damon Kowalski, mission leader, comes over their headsets. “All units in assigned alpha point?”

All six pairs confirm.

“Engage.”

Serro and Drake open their door to a replica 1920’s style hotel hallway. The hall is cream coloured with dark maroon accents and stained wooden features. Era appropriate lamps are distributed evenly along both walls. “Drake, ease up a bit.”

“I want this shit done.”

“One of them might have a gun and alert the others, so relax, we don’t want a panic.”

“What do you think will happen when people realise we’re

shooting innocents?"

"Non-combatants," Serro corrects.

"Do we shoot anyone that sees us? Perhaps we should just burn the building down," says Drake.

Mac Hudson's gravely voice comes over their headsets, "One target down."

Drake grunts, "Jesus, already?"

They are at their allocated target apartment door now, silencers attached, guns at the ready. So far the hall has been clear, but someone is playing loud Industrial music on this floor.

"Captain, Team Four at bravo point. Engaging," Serro advises.

Drake shakes his head. *This is going to get nasty.* Kicking the door in, he surprises a young woman so badly she drops her cup of tea. "Are you Alexandra Tasker?"

She is still in shock and stammers an answer. "W-what do you want with my daughter?"

Daughter? This woman would barely be thirty. *How young is this target?* "Where is Alexandra Tasker?"

The mother looks at them in horror when a little voice speaks.

"Mama?" A little girl, not more than five years old appears. Her blonde hair is tied in plaits, and she is holding a soft toy elephant to her chest. Her skin is pale with black veins creeping down her arms and up her neck. Her eye sockets are so dark it's like she has been punched.

Drake's stomach feels like it's been filled with mercury, "Oh shit."

Serro is frozen solid.

"Target two down," says the deceptively soft voice of Mia Saker.

"Sit down on the couch over there," orders Drake, waving towards their lounge.

Mother and daughter huddle together on the seat. The child is observing them with wide eyes, her mother stroking her hair and mumbling to her in some attempt at comfort. They look more vulnerable and helpless than any two beings that Serro has ever seen.

He whispers to Captain Kowalski, turning his back to ensure the woman and child cannot hear, "Sir, the target is a child."

Kowalski's voice is remorseless, "Your orders are clear. All contaminants are to be taken out, along with all possible victims of secondary exposure."

Serro's eyes dart to the mother, "Shoot anyone living with them?"

"Target three down," comes the voice of Morgan Gilmore.

"That's correct, Hopper, out," says Kowalski.

Serro takes out his earpiece and Drake follows suit.

The mother is cradling her little girl, "What do you people want?"

Serro doesn't answer but looks at Drake expectantly, "Well?"

Drake shakes his head, “No way. I’m not doing it.” Softly but firmly he makes his position clear. “I can’t.” He is grateful that the Industrial music is drowning out this disgusting conversation.

“We’ve all read the reports on what this disease does. This may be a mercy,” says Serro, clearly unconvinced.

Drake smirks without a trace of humour. “Prevent death with more death?”

“Are you really that naïve? You know what happens once the body dies, don’t you? Or don’t you believe the reports?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“I’ve seen footage of the dead test subjects, they *come back*, Drake.”

“I’m not killing children.”

“Did you watch the footage of what they do when they wake up?”

“If you’re so sure, then *you* kill them.”

Serro nods, straightens his shoulders, and raises his gun when he feels the nozzle of Drake’s sidearm press against the back of his head. He freezes.

“Like I said, you kill them… but then I’ll kill you.”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

Drake’s hand is shaking so badly he can hear the gun rattling. “Serro, we just need to take a moment,” The child is still staring at them, but her mother has started to weep hopelessly.

Deep down Drake knows Serro is right. At least he’s right in theory. They have both seen the footage of the contaminants when they wake up. The horrible monstrous things they become are too hideous to contemplate; but executing a child is completely beyond justification. He can’t understand how his life has come to this point. He is a party boy that just loved having fun too much.

Comparative to shooting this poor little girl, killing Serro really does seem easy. *He’s made his choice, he signed his life away*. He tightens his grip on the trigger ever so slightly.

Serro hears the trigger move and his eyes widen. “Drake, easy.”

“Shut up!” he yells back.

The mother stands.

“You sit down! Sit *now*!” Drake voice raises and begins to crack with stress. She drops back into her seat, hands up before her in a placating gesture. Drake blinks hard. He knows logically the virus cannot be allowed to spread. It must not get beyond Gateway, the main entrance to the city.

This child’s body is, at this moment, being emptied of its humanity and remade into something hungry, reproductive and contagious. Prolonging this situation will only make the child suffer more. *A mercy*, he reminds himself. The thought feels so empty and

hollow that it actually makes him feel worse, like the walls around him are closing in. He finds it hard to draw a breath.

Serro isn't a child though. Serro made his decision to come here. If he dies, maybe Alexandra won't have to. Drake has known Serro for over ten years and presses himself to believe that he will understand. The flood of emotion is making it difficult to discern any logical thought. He just can't do it.

"Target four down," is just barely heard on the dangling earpiece near Drake's collar.

How can Caufmann do this day in and day out? Making choices for other people's lives, people he's never met, people he doesn't have to look in the eye before he kills. Then again perhaps he does. Perhaps he *has* to. It's the horrible truth of doing what's necessary. Not many have that kind of conviction, whether it is right or wrong.

Drake aims and fires the silenced gun, not at Serro but past him, hitting the child square in the forehead. That single moment is frozen in time, indelibly carved into his memory along with a soul-rending rush of grief over his choice.

Serro turns to look at Drake, but his eyes are already shut, his gun falling to the floor, and his mouth is open, spewing a terrible howl of anguish.

The mother starts screaming. It is the worst sound either of the soldiers have ever heard, a cry so full of pain it demands you be drawn in to suffer with them. Serro, almost on autopilot, shoots her twice before also dropping his weapon. He turns to face his friend, trembling. Drake is still moaning in horror; his eyes are now wide and crazed, his fists pushed into his temples as if attempting to crush the image of the murder he has just committed out of his mind.

"Drake, Drake, listen to me," says Serro stepping over to him.

"Oh *god*!" he howls.

"Drake, it's okay. Drake, please."

Another wail of sorrow and Drake shuts his eyes so tightly it's like he's trying to force them back into his skull, never to see again.

Serro grips him and holds him. "Drake, Drake, she was already dead, you know that," tears start to roll down his cheeks, "she was already dead," he starts rocking back and forth a little. Drake clenches his jaw so hard he can hear his own teeth grinding. "She was already dead, man."

Serro switches off, feeling everything drain away back into the numbness that a soldier is supposed to feel while going about their job.

He'd killed women before but not a civilian, not a mother in her own home with her child.

Serro Hopper is switched off and feels no guilt now; it is

somewhere else so far away from him. He isn't sure if he'll ever feel anything again.

"Already dead." he repeats tonelessly.

◆◆◆

When Rennin arrives back at his apartment he can tell Carla is still there as soon as he opens the door. He can smell her perfume and what could only be bleach. If she was cleaning, she must be feeling better. He walks into his puny apartment to sees her wrapped up in a blanket on the couch. She looks up at him with her bright baby blues.

"Hi," she rasps slightly.

"I've passed logs of shit that look better than you," he says blandly but his eyes betray his genuine concern.

Carla smiles, "You don't look so good yourself."

Rennin still looks terrible and he has the most intense cottonmouth, "Yeah…" he cracks his neck. "It's my rugged viral nose paste that gives my skin its seemingly glowing sheen."

"Or you're a greasy euro."

Rennin sniggers, "I've shot people for less than that."

"Shot a pearl necklace, maybe," she says with a fluidic cough.

Rennin takes a slow breath. He doesn't want to know, he just wants to tell Caufmann she hasn't been vaccinated, get the drug, and dose her up. "Have you been vaccinated for that flu that's been going around?"

She sniffs, "Yes, and a day later I get sick. Typical."

Rennin pulls his lips behind his teeth feeling something inside go dark, like a light turning off.

"What's the matter?"

Rennin purses his lips and shakes his head. "I'm just worried about you."

"Flu never killed me before."

When Rennin was eating lunch earlier he remembers overhearing something one of the scientists said about the reactivation of the Embryon Protocol to find anyone infected. That means someone might look for her.

If Rennin knows the military, and he does bitterly, it is only a matter of time before there are hit squads out in the dark, removing the infected as fast as they can. *I won't let them get her*. "Can you do me a favour?"

"Sure."

"Don't leave the apartment for a few days."

"Why?"

He sits and takes her hand, her cold hand, in his and looks at her earnestly. “Trust me.”

◆◆◆

Caufmann is in the lower labs refining the testing of Del’s internal systems. There seems to be a serious problem once the combat protocols are unlocked. He uses sonar to see his surroundings but has great difficulty distinguishing between viable targets and non-combatants.

In all simulations, he lasts about half an hour before he starts to become confused, shooting friendlies and targets alike. With a glitch like this, Del will never be allowed in the field. “There must be some way to determine why he suddenly sees friendlies as enemies.”

Rethrin mutters something before responding to him. “He either kills everyone or no one at all. Why did you think it was such a good idea to make a blind android?”

“I like a challenge.”

“Eyes would solve everything.”

“*Not* if they’re disabled. Android eyes are their lifelines, they can not do anything without them. Once Del is perfected, he will be the ultimate in future combat. There are none like him.”

“What about Del’s brother unit Adrenin?” asks Rethrin.

Caufmann glances at Rethrin for a moment before continuing to read the diagnostics display on the Transfilm in his hand. “Not ready.”

Rethrin stares hard at him. “William… I’ve worked with you long enough to know when you’re hiding something. It’s frustrating.”

“You must spend a lot of your time frustrated.”

“If Adrenin is Del’s twin, why is he taking so long? It’s not just a birthing algorithm instalment, I know that’s garbage.”

“Adrenin has eyes and he isn’t exactly Del’s twin,” he says pausing for a moment to think. “Maybe more of a half-brother.”

Rethrin’s expression is almost a wince, “What have you done this time?”

“Doctor Hillon is already aware of this, but I’ve cloned one of the Suvaco units.”

Rethrin is stunned. “You did *what*?”

“I needed to know their limitations. After everything that’s gone wrong with Del, I now believe their programming is organic and can be copied with the genome.”

“To accomplish what?”

“Adrenin may hold the key to decoding the Suvaco units. I tried altering certain sequences with Del but the result has left him

unstable. Adrenin is a direct copy."

"It would explain the extreme amount of ghost code," says Rethrin.

"The main aim with Adrenin is to ascertain how the Suvaco units communicate with each other. Once done, I can set Adrenin up to command them, should they ever awaken."

Rethrin scoffs, "It could do the exact opposite, *they* might be able to command *him*."

"Which explains Del's existence. He is the contingency. He is specifically designed to kill androids."

She nods to herself. "William, may I be excused?"

"Of course, I'll stay on."

Rethrin walks out of the lab door. It flies up into the bulkhead then slams behind her, excluding her from the lab.

Doctor Roths is waiting on the other side, "What did he say?"

Rethrin avoids eye contact. "I didn't ask."

"Why not? You believe the infection sweeping the city is his doing. He told me both strains of DNA weren't made here and I believe him, Mepida. He's insane, most definitely, but he's not a liar."

"I *know* he made it. He's sick."

Roths' sickly complexion is ashen. When she swallows it sounds like two pieces of wet sandpaper rubbing together. "He talks to his test subjects, you know. He knows most of their names. He looks them in the eye when he injects them with his experiments. Do you know why he does that?" asks Roths doing her best to suppress a coughing fit.

Rethrin shudders and shakes her head.

"He says he wants to remember what he's taking from them, because he owes them that much."

Rethrin takes a sharp breath and looks like she's just eaten something that tastes horrendously nasty.

"Listen to me carefully, Mepida, a man willing to do that *does not* mince words with his staff. We're already in the restricted section, and we aren't going anywhere."

Rethrin obviously still doesn't like it.

Roths coughs into her sleeve and wipes her eyes. "You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?"

"Such as?"

Roths eyes are piercing, "If you do, I'll kill you."

Rethrin looks up in surprise.

Roths is standing perfectly still. "But I do envy you," and with that, she enters Caufmann's lab where he is still reading the diagnostics. The door slams down and Caufmann looks up.

"Hello, Doctor Roths, I'd like your opinion on something."

“Of course, William.”

“Am I going to have to kill Doctor Rethrin?”

Roths huffs a little, bringing on another hacking cough. “I don’t think so, sir. She still thinks saving the world is supposed to be romantic.”

Caufmann makes a rumble with his throat. “I don’t think anyone would accept what we do here as saving anything.”

Roths smirks, “It’s like a gangrenous limb, you have to remove it.”

“No one ever says thank you while it’s being cut.”

“Maybe one day,” she hacks again, this time hard enough to nearly double her over. “William, can I have my antigen now?”

“Oh, yes,” Caufmann says absently, producing a vial from his coat pocket and loading it into a syringe. “I forgot about that, I’m sorry. How are you finding it?” he asks looking up at her.

Roths tilts her head cracking her neck. “It’s quite crippling, I’d prefer Ebola.”

Caufmann actually smiles enough to crease his face. “There’s always next week, but I get to test the next one,” he says flicking the syringe before jabbing her arm with the antigen. Most of her veins are black. “How is the pain in the lower spine?”

“Pretty intense. I started internally haemorrhaging this morning, and felt the parasite move. How far along was I?”

“Probably another day or two and you would have been too far gone. I have to thank you for enduring it for so long. Initially I found it very disturbing that you were infected.”

Roths smiles slightly, “I probably don’t want to know the answer, but will the parasite break down with the virus?”

“It will degrade, don’t worry. It requires an enzyme that the virus produces to sustain itself.”

She sighs, “For once, knowing that you have no fear of telling the cold hard truth actually comforts me.”

“You’ll still feel terrible for another day or so.”

“Do you know why they’ve released this virus?”

“I have an idea, but I don’t know why this city specifically.”

Roths’ interest is piqued, “Do tell.”

Caufmann takes a deep breath. “I need more time before I make an educated guess.”

6.
Blackout

Rennin is pacing outside Caufmann's office.

He talks absolute garbage all day, he should be able to tell a slight fib to get the vaccine.

I don't care if he says it's too late for her. I have to try.

Rennin had been wearing his armour-weave coat to work everyday since his return, but the upper echelons of staff have forced him to revert to wearing his standard black Godyssey tunic. So he wears it over the top of his leather coat, looking absolutely ridiculous, tearing at the seams. But aggravating the staff isn't bringing its usual solace. And he's barely even ribbed Wanker for most of the day.

Carla's skin is now almost translucent, her veins almost all black. Her back hurts enough to keep her seated most of the time.

Rennin scratches at his head roughly, then presses the opening plate to Caufmann's office door and walks in. The doctor looks up, "Your appointment was fifteen minutes ago. I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to stop meandering out there."

"Sorry, sir, I just get nervous around handsome, gangly, weird men."

Caufmann doesn't react, he just stares at the watchman. "I see. Was she inoculated?"

"No, sir," Rennin says stepping forwards.

Caufmann's eyes drop back to his desk reading something. "Carla Spencer, is that her name?"

Rennin's heart sinks. *Well that's it.* "She's registered on the Embryon Protocol?"

"It clearly shows that her central nervous system is under considerable duress. The antigen won't work if it's administered now, you know."

"Yes I know."

"I can't give it to you."

The last time Rennin felt like this was crawling from a burned house through the ashes of those closest to him.

"I haven't wanted to save a life in twenty years. I've killed people for the military, for Godyssey, and for you. The military said I fought for freedom, Godyssey said for the greater good and by the time you asked me I didn't know or care because all I can remember is people dying. I've never saved anyone I cared about and I'm also unsure if I've ever tried since," his face is pallid. "Please… I want to save her," he almost chokes out.

Caufmann's face is unreadable. He's completely still, which usually means he's thinking carefully. Rennin makes a shrugging motion and starts finding anywhere else to look but at the doctor.

Caufmann takes a breath, stands up, puts his hand in his pocket and places a vial on the table. "I'm sorry, Ren. I'll give you this vial but I urge you not to use it. You'll be taking a life by wasting this."

It is insane and Rennin knows it, but as he walks home he feels slightly better having the antigen with him even if Carla is incurable now. The vial is more of a security blanket anyway.

He still isn't sure what he's going to do with her but he has Killjoy already armed and at the ready. He doesn't dare to think of shooting her as yet, he's only choosing to take the gun home. That's nice and simple. Just taking the gun home *and blowing your girlfriend's head off*, he suddenly thinks. He stops in the middle of the street.

"Fuck!" he spits out, halfway to hyperventilating, drawing a bonus few glances from passers by.

Arriving back at his apartment, he cautiously opens the door. All the lights are off. Not a single sound comes from the darkened doorway. He forces his lungs to pull in a full breath so he can listen for any sounds.

Nothing.

Rennin steps inside, closing the door quietly behind him.

His artificial eye can see in the dark far better than his human eye but it's still not clear enough for his liking. He's unsure whether or not to turn the light on or draw Killjoy, or both. Apparently the infected all turn hostile sooner or later.

He flips the light on and finds his living area perfectly tidy. In the bedroom he finds the bed made, the bathroom spotless, and no Carla. The only thing out of the ordinary is the bathroom bin. It seems to be full of rubbish that look a like receipts.

Red receipts, not the usual colour for a doctor's office.

Rennin stoops and picks it up, his face quirking with amused curiosity.

His face drops when he reads it, "Herbal Flu Remedy," he says as his bowels freeze over.

He realizes that if she takes herbal medicine then she never took Caufmann's vaccine. Rennin's mobile is in his hand instantly and he dials Carla's number. After a few rings, "Hello?" she says.

"Where are you?" he demands a little more aggressively than he meant to.

“I just wanted to be home, I feel awful.”

“Are you there now?”

“Yes, what’s your problem?”

“Listen to me. I’m coming over, just do *not* open the door to anyone but me.”

“Rennin, I—” she stops for a moment, “You’re starting to scare me.”

“Look, this is not an obsessive thing, you’re infected with a disease and they know where you live.”

“What are you talking about?”

“They’re killing anyone infected to delay the outbreak.”

“That’s insane,” she says with a wet cough.

“I work for them! Just stay there, I have the antidote.”

Silence on the other end.

“I know it sounds like a bad action movie written by a concussed neckbeard, but trust me on this, I work for Doctor Caufmann.”

More silence.

“Please!”

A pause. “Okay.”

“*Don’t* open the door.”

“I speak English, Rennin.”

He is in his car zooming through the rain and city streets before he’s even had a conscious thought. The odds of the military coming for her are quite high if she’s already on the Embryon registry. Since she lives near the lab itself, it is exponentially more likely that there is an assassination team on the way. They will start the executions in the Centre-city District, following a spiral pattern outwards, moving through the Middle-city and finishing with the Outer-city districts.

Part of Rennin cannot believe how passively the city’s populace are letting this go on. Are they not even the least bit curious as to why the military presence has increased tenfold? Are they really so compliant that they just trust anything Godyssey do? Or are they just glad it’s happening to other people? *Sheeple.*

He weaves between cars and traffic, speeding through traffic signals that flash-fine him as he passes but his only thoughts are for Carla. God help anyone audacious enough to step in his path.

Rennin slows down a little as he approaches her apartment block. A black armoured car is parked outside, a matte black plate-less vehicle that looks fairly inconspicuous in the dark and rainy night. Someone is already here, possibly for her.

Rennin parks in a disabled zone, raises his hood and steps out of his car, eyes focussed on the military vehicle. His left eye gleams in the darkness.

The streets are crawling with cars and people despite the weather

and the virus situation; Rennin appreciates the ability to blend with the masses as he crosses the street, sidling into the entrance of the building.

He takes the stairs two at a time, up to the tenth floor, all leg muscles screaming. Peering down the hallway, Rennin is surprised to see no soldiers at all. He walks towards her door, trying to keep quiet but his left leg makes a distinct thump as he moves. When he arrives at her door, his adrenaline has waned enough for the paranoia to start seeping back in.

If she sees me like this, she'll think I'm nuts. The last thing he wants is for her to be scared, especially of him, but in this situation she should be terrified. *She can be afraid of me, just so long as she's alright.*

Rennin waits a moment and rotates his shoulders, cracks his neck and takes a deep breath. He knows she thinks he's mad but they'll be coming for her. He's poised to knock when he hears a whimper from inside, and Carla's muffled voice. "Please, don't."

"I'm sorry, miss, it'll be painless," says a voice Rennin already despises. He draws Killjoy and kicks the door. It shatters, dangling loosely from its lock, swinging open. He is in the room before the door has had time to settle back towards its damaged frame.

Inside the room, Rennin sees a Beta HolinMech soldier, his sidearm aimed at Carla's head.

Rennin's gun hand trembles as he tries to suppress the blinding fit of burning rage devouring everything within him. "Who the fuck are you?" he spits at the soldier.

The Beta HolinMech keeps his gun trained on Carla. He doesn't even seem surprised at Rennin's sudden entrance. "Sir, drop your weapon and put your hands on your head."

Rennin disconnects from the situation as much as he can. He is going to kill this soldier but realises he can't use Killjoy. The ammunition is too easily traceable. He glances at the soldier's gun. *That will do for this meat-sack, all I have to do is grab it.*

Almost holding his breath he trains his gun on Carla, who looks terribly sick, and very scared. Rennin lowers his voice and speaks very softly. "Carla Spencer is my target."

"State your name and rank."

"Black Aegis, unit Zero-Four," Rennin states. Black Aegis is a black operations group Rennin has never been a part of, but the mention of it coupled with the presence of an infected, makes it far more difficult to dismiss outright. Black Aegis units are notorious for killing targets and witnesses.

The soldier's hard but plain face remains still. His blue eyes betray a sudden doubt as he regards the hooded figure, single eye glowing, pointing his gun at what he thinks is a mutual target. "I

wasn't aware of any Black Aegis units still active."

"I'm sure the reason is obvious. Name yourself, HolinMech."

"Corporal Dan Logan."

"Well, *corporal*, stand aside."

"Black Aegis was outlawed, I'm going to have to confirm with command."

Rennin pushes all the air out of his lungs slowly then draws a deep breath.

"Very well."

He swings his gun from Carla to the trooper, kicking off the floor. He half leaps at Logan, who doesn't panic, but moves his weapon quickly and precisely, letting off a round that hits Rennin square in the chest. He grunts in pain, but it doesn't stop his momentum as he crashes into the soldier.

They fall to the floor grappling with each other, the soldier gritting his teeth but still cold, calm and collected. Rennin is grunting and his breathing comes in short ragged gasps. The hole in his chest is becoming hard to ignore. His andronic right hand grips the soldier's left wrist. It snaps Logan's wrist like a bread stick causing the soldier's face to twist in sudden agony. His sidearm to falls to the floor.

Rennin braces his mechanical left leg against the floor and stands up, still gripping the soldier. He spins 180 degrees, intending to throw the soldier over himself and onto the floor, subduing him. His dramatically increased strength causes him to throw the soldier like a rag-doll across the room, smashing him through the window in one fluid motion. Dan Logan is gone before Rennin even registers the sound of breaking glass.

"Ren," a sobbing voice says.

Rennin snaps out of his shock and sees Carla crouched on the floor. *The drug!* "Carla, are you alright?" he runs to kneel next to her.

"You've been shot." she coughs up, a trace of blood on her lower lip.

Rennin draws the syringe from his pocket and loads the antigen into it. "This will cure you."

"What's going on?"

"Carla, the longer you wait the worse it'll get. There's an RV outside that will no doubt have more soldiers, who will be coming to check what happened up here any moment. They won't be happy I killed their pillow-biting friend," he says, struggling to breathe.

She pulls up her dressing gown sleeve. Protruding black veins cover her thin pale forearm. Wasting no time, he injects her with the anti toxin, then returning the syringe back to his jacket pocket. He takes a sharp wheezing breath and pushes himself back to his feet, picking up Logan's sidearm. "We have to get moving."

Carla vomits on the floor. “I can’t. I’m so tired.”

Rennin picks her up, as a groom would carry a bride. She has passed out and he is steadily getting dizzier, the pain in his chest increasing. *Come on, old man, hip replacement next year I promise.*

Arriving at the stairwell, he starts down, just to see torchlights shining down below. The lights are bobbing as they move.

Rifle mounted.

He places Carla down gently, and grasps Logan’s sidearm. He begins to descend the stairs at a leisurely pace. The soldiers both train red dots on him as they get close.

“Remain calm, citizen,” one of them says and Rennin nods, backing up against the wall to let them pass.

As they go by, he twists his body to fire a bullet through his coat and into the back of one of their heads. The other turns around, but Rennin is already at him and lands a right hook with such force that the head snaps round far enough to break his neck. He is dead before hitting the floor.

Rennin doesn’t bother to acknowledge them any further. He retrieves Carla, then starts to make his way down again.

◆◆◆

After a very slow drive home, Rennin carries Carla up to his apartment. He places her in the bed and covers her up. Her face is incredibly gaunt. *The trauma of almost being shot will no doubt create more stress lines.* The thought of her face marked by that soldier’s actions makes Rennin think seriously about driving back there just to repeatedly kick the corpse.

He stands up only to nearly fall over, the horrible pain in his chest beating like a hammer on his sternum. Rennin heads straight for the bathroom and sits on the toilet to at least get off his feet. He leans back, looking down at the bullet hole. It has cut straight through the armour-weave like butter.

Rennin unzips the hooded jacket under his leather coat, peeling it back. Ripping the singlet beneath, a miniature crater in his sternum is revealed. *At least it looks shallow.*

The watchman stares at it for a moment and notices something odd. A copper coloured lump, perfectly circular protrudes from the centre, sticking up as if to peekaboo at him. Using his index finger and thumb, he grips the thing feeling an instant rush of pain. Gritting his teeth and steeling himself mentally, he pulls the object free with a disturbing wet sound as it escapes his wound.

Grunting and sighing in relief, he brings the object up for closer

inspection. It's the bullet. He stares at it for a moment, rotating it and finding that its been flattened at the end as if it hit a bullet proof vest.

Rennin drops the slug on the floor and looks back at his wound and can just see some of his exposed sternum but it doesn't look like bone, the surface looks like pearl but the pattern is more pointed where pearl is contoured waves.

The watchman fetches his little medical kit from the cabinet and tacks the wound together before applying the grafting gel. It will seal the wound by morning, thanks to another little development by Caufmann. He tries to stand but a wave of darkness overcomes him.

His legs collapse, and he's unconscious before he hits the bathroom floor.

About the time Rennin blacks out, Doctor Caufmann is hurrying down to the lower levels of the lab. The other scientists are busy sleeping, or what ever they do in their downtime. It gives Caufmann free reign of the level where the CryoGen Industries team are kept in deep freeze.

Nordoth and Straker have to be removed from stasis now, as there won't be enough time to thaw them once the infected turn hostile. The reports from street level are increasingly bleak. Three Beta HolinMechs were found dead at Carla Spencer's apartment block, and though Caufmann knows who did it, he has kept his silence. Three measly soldiers are nothing next to Caufmann's body count, after all.

Damon Kowalski, their captain, is absolutely furious nonetheless.

The Horizon Morgue is full of bodies that have either died of the virus before the change, or been shot by the Horizon Military and Beta HolinMech strike-teams. Even storage rooms at the lab have been emptied of most of their contents, in order to be utilised as body storage. Hundreds of them, soon to be thousands.

Caufmann walks up the narrow, dimly lit hallway, until he gets to the CryoGen Industries chamber, Room V. He manually types in one the interchanging thirty-six digit codes from memory; a feat normally impossible for ordinary people. But the doctor is far from ordinary.

He steps into the freezer chamber where Nordoth and Straker are frozen.

Three of six pods are empty. That isn't right.

He stands still, his mind racing, for a few moments wondering how this happened. Everyone is banned from CryoGen Room V. Yet the pods are empty. The three people still in stasis are Timothy Fowl, Warwick Balkan and Jonathon Holin, the blue illuminated nametags

proclaim from the top of each cylindrical pod, their bodies frozen upright.

Caufmann has never been in Room V before. Seeing the name of the man who designed the HolinMech system genuinely surprises him. Straker, Nordoth and another person: Severn Mercer, are gone.

Caufmann knows of Mercer. He assisted Nordoth to design the first combat suit that aided in protection, as well as strength enhancement, prior to CryoGen's experimentation with hybrid and cybrid technology. Caufmann always wondered what Nordoth and Straker would say if they knew how Van Gower has utilised their theories. Looking at their empty pods, he figures he'll never know.

The life sign monitor has obviously been hacked. It still shows that their pods are inhabited. Who woke them from suspended animation? Where are they now? How did they do it? Van Gower could have unfrozen them and gotten rid of them, but he seemed genuinely worried when Caufmann suggested thawing them to answer his questions. Whoever or whatever took them out of stasis must have done it years ago. Thick clumps of dust have accumulated inside the empty pods.

Caufmann only ever discovered the pods as they are registered on the lab inventory. Godyssey must have wanted to keep Nordoth and Straker's expertise on ice. Or prevent them from starting fresh elsewhere. Godyssey is, after all, the bastard son of CryoGen Industries.

Caufmann eyes Holin's freeze pod with curiosity, but up until this moment he has done nothing against Van Gower's wishes in any extreme way. He's only willing to risk the chairman's wrath for Straker and Nordoth's information, which would be infinitely valuable. He doesn't need anything from Holin that he can think of at this time.

He shuts the lights off in CryoGen Room V, his head spinning. *Oh.* If the life signs were hacked, then the bodies may have been stolen, not released.

If neither Van Gower nor myself know about this then who else could?

No one could get into the lab. Something has gone wrong. But he can't think who could have bypassed the security, much less who would be able to mimic the life sign signal to mask their theft.

Later, he will be able to investigate. Now, his attention is required desperately elsewhere, so he proceeds further down the corridor to Room XVI. The door slides up into the bulkhead, allowing Caufmann to step inside the dark room beyond, where a shining pair of red eyes is all he can see. "Arca?"

The door slams down behind him, sealing him in. Blue LED lights flicker on, allowing enough light to see each other, turning the

glowing eyes from red to purple.

Arca Drej, HolinMech Warrior deserter, stands in front of the doctor with wide eyes, hard Viking-like features, and unusually long white hair for a military android. His silvery grey HolinMech armour is still in pristine condition; Drej disappeared just before a mission.

An X-shaped scar in his forehead shows where Caufmann removed his tracker chip. He also removed the internal transponder, preventing the ability to trace his whereabouts.

Drej stole a shuttle and had escaped as far as Titan before the engines blew out. “Doctor Caufmann, I have to get out of here,” says Drej’s soft but deep resonant voice.

“Impossible at this time.”

“I can still hear it tapping! Sometimes I can feel it!” he shouts putting his hands to his chest. It looks like he is about to claw something out.

Caufmann steps forward, but the movement carries with it a definite threat. “You have to keep your voice down. You will always feel it tapping as long as you live, so you will just have to accept it.”

“And what is this?” he asks, showing Caufmann the back of his right hand, where a fleur-de-lis symbol protrudes.

“You know what it means.”

“But I’m *not* a traitor!” he yells, somehow keeping his voice to a whisper.

“To Godyssey you are.”

“They betrayed me!” he says, again in a fierce whisper. “Look what they *did* to me!” he pulls at his face with his left hand. The skin strains at first but soon tears revealing a pearlescent bone shell beneath. The ripped muscle fibres wriggle and writhe, struggling to reattach themselves, but Drej keeps pulling until Caufmann grips his wrist.

“You’re going to have to stop that,” states the doctor patiently.

Drej allows Caufmann to draw his hand away from his bleeding face, where the muscle fibres are already beginning to grasp each other, reconstructing. “I can’t stay here alone anymore, I’m going out of my mind and that’s supposed to be impossible.”

Caufmann pities Arca Drej wholeheartedly; he is suffering the worst binary decay and andronic psychosis he’s ever heard about. Perhaps not as bad as Valhara’s madness during the CryoZaiyon Wars, but Drej is deteriorating at an accelerated pace and being cooped up in this room isn’t doing his mind any good at all.

Valhara wasn’t the first android to suffer such a catastrophic break down, but it is the most well known. The first was Jonathon Holin’s very first HolinMech, before Drej’s kind, before they were military property. Though it seemed to have little difficulty killing the

crew of the Montrialis. Alexandrite Talisman was its name. Drik Tally, for short.

Caufmann just doesn't have enough time to come and talk with him to help him deal with all of these issues. Drej knows he was human. He possesses no information or evidence, he just knows. "Listen, Arca, you *will* be getting out of here but you just need to hang on a little longer."

"I was better off on Titan."

"You fried your ship's engines trying to fire them loud enough to drown out the sound of your own insanity. You would have been alone to go completely mad and tear your face off all you wanted, but would you be happier?"

Drej eyes Caufmann carefully, revealing he is most definitely aware he's being made fun of. "All I've done is switch one prison for another."

Caufmann feels a fleeting moment of wanting to hit Drej. "I'm well aware of what you've been through."

Drej scoffs out a derisive laugh. "Are you now?"

Caufmann rolls up his right sleeve revealing his embedded circuitry.

Drej isn't impressed. "So you have a cybernetic arm."

Caufmann removes his glasses, revealing his scarred shining eyes then he takes a scalpel out of his lab coat and slices his right cheek causing a small hiss of cold steam and a trickle of a red liquid that emits thin white mist. "Do you see now?" he asks, snapping the frozen scalpel like a stick.

Drej's eyes are the only part of him that betray his utter shock. "CryoZaiyon blood…"

Caufmann nods once.

"You?" Drej chokes out. His mind is reeling and completely unable to process all this data.

"I've spent years in hiding," his gaze turns distant. "So many years cutting into my flesh and removing what technology *they* placed into me. I had no choice as technology became evermore advanced and capable of finding me, and others like us who are still missing. Can you even fathom what it's like for a self-aware being to have to cut into itself and remove more and more as the years go by? Do you care? Can you care? Sometimes I'm not even sure that I do."

Drej is silent, a rash of compiling errors scrolling across his vision. "Who are you?"

The doctor looks at him, "I am William Caufmann."

"Now you are," Drej pauses, absolutely still, "who were you then?"

Caufmann's face is still steaming and as the mist passes across his

face before evaporating his eyes glow dimly, despite the obfuscation. “I was born on December 15 in 2239 to parents who have had their records deleted. I became remotely flagged through the Embryon Protocol at some point in my adolescence, and was harvested at some point during my twenties. Underwent full conversion on August 3rd 2296 to fight the CryoZaiyon Wars. Officially registered AWOL November 29th 2306.”

“There were only a handful of CryoZaiyons that returned from Venus III. Accessing,” he says, his red eyes flickering like a camera shutter as he scans his files. “Forgal Lauros, Sephirlin Darrad, Angelien Zillah, Xelxor Akcoda, and Saifer Veidan are the registered survivors. All are now dead. You are none of them.”

Caufmann’s expression appears regretful for a moment. “It’s difficult to comprehend surviving a war like that, only to die within a year of returning to Earth. I am officially registered as MIA. Though that is a technicality applied to all CryoZaiyons that never returned from Venus III. They simply cannot confirm what is a well known fact since they haven’t seen my body, nor the bodies of the other battalions.”

Drej’s eyes widen. “Are there others?”

Caufmann steps closer to Drej. “I’ve cut myself to pieces to remain hidden here. I’ve cut others to pieces to maintain my cover. I’ve given up every principle I was taught to develop, just to be ignored like a normal person, and you will listen to me closely, Arca Drej,” he says actually slowing down as he speaks to make sure each word impacts more than the one before. He grips Drej’s face hard enough to purse his lips and makes him lean closer. “You will *not* go insane, I’ve no use for insanity. I’ve been in hiding for almost fifteen years, so you can last—*quietly*—as long as I say you can, do you understand me?”

Drej’s eyes don’t exhibit any defiance so Caufmann releases him. Drej still isn’t convinced. “You said you weren’t like them, how is your use of me any different to the ones I ran from?”

“I care if you live.”

Drej swallows.

“Don’t be frightened,” he says gently. “Anyone looking for us will be dead in a month.”

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Rennin wakes up to someone slapping him.

He was having a dream about fire, knives, and some kind of circular spinning room full of blades all crisscrossing each other as the room spun like a psychotic dervish. Someone dressed in his clothes,

with an inhuman parody of his face was throwing parchments made of his own skin into the revolving razor-well, and as each piece was thrown in, Rennin's own form would become less.

Written upon the pages of skin was gibberish, though Rennin could still comprehend it as it was spelled out in his own blood. Blood laced with memories, stored there by his own mind. His humanity was being shredded before him as the pages of flesh were hewed and cleaved from his body.

At his point of view, he began losing skin himself and become lacerated. He could feel the cuts at first but with each piece of him devoured by knives the feeling grew less potent until finally he was only watching his very soul being stripped from him.

Each page dropped in had his signature and a date but not in the traditional sense, the date was in the form of a memory. A beating. A night of drugs and a cold razor. Falling in love. Cradling his baby brother. Having food thrown at him by his little sister. Being taught to carve wood by his father. Being held by his mother. Crawling through their remains, two days after the GA bombed Melbourne permanently rendering it underwater. Running headlong into war hoping to kill everything living, to die or be damned before having to face the pain.

All too soon the dark version of him had shredded everything that makes him who he is, leaving nothing behind. No mind. No feeling. No warmth. No eyes. Just a bleeding, skinless thing crumpled on the floor crying out of reflex rather than any real emotion.

The floor was cold, so very cold and even colder when the exposed veins began creeping out of his body to slither and slide across the porous tiles at all angles as if trying to escape the body.

As the veins spread out they quickly began to dry out and started struggling to move then others slithered and entwined with each other all the while trying to spread further from the shivering form they left behind.

The ruination of human meat and bone opened its mouth trying to cry out, but only a retching hiss escaped its throat before the thing that was once Rennin Farrow finally stopped moving. It didn't die, because it wasn't really alive to begin with. Its veins and muscle strings just kept creeping ever outwards, like most diseases.

Rennin's eyes shoot open and for a moment all he sees is a hazy white blur with a shadow somewhere above him. They focus quickly and the matted haired, teary-eyed Carla comes into view, her blue eyes looking down at him in fear, her fringe tickling his face. His mouth tastes like a sandpaper condom and he struggles to speak, "Were you hitting me?"

She smiles and wipes a tear from her left eye. "You were shot last night, I thought you were dead."

“Women always like the damaged ones,” he says, kneading his face with a free hand almost expecting to find nothing but blood and bone.

She smiles in a patient kind of way, “Still have your sense of humour at least.”

Rennin doesn’t acknowledge her comment. “It’s like you think we’re broken vases that you can put back together, good as new. But there’s always cracks.”

“Rennin, listen to me, you were shot last night. I have to get you to hospital.”

Rennin puts his hand on her face and feels her forehead. “Your fever has gone.”

“I know.”

“You still look like shit.”

Her eyes look hurt but worse than that, she looks terrified and probably has been for a while. Rennin pushes himself off the floor and holds her tightly feeling just for a moment everything terrible is far away.

“I’m sorry, I don’t handle my own emotions well. I normally play with other people’s,” he says waggling his fingers like some kind of creeping vampire. Rennin kisses her, trying to transmit what he feels into something physical, so at least there is an expression of some kind to show her he cares.

After he leans back she has a look at the scar on his chest. It’s already sealed and pink. “What’s happened to you? I *saw* you get shot.”

Rennin looks to his chest, “The skin healing is some toxin Wonder Boy made at the lab. As for the bullet…” he checks around the bathroom floor, noting a fierce stiffness in his neck. He spots it and holds it up, showing the flattened end with pride.

“I’m not entirely sure what to make of it. I knew Thermosteel was strong but not strong enough to stop a bullet. It’s lucky it hit me in the sternum, if it went between my ribs I would have been in real trouble.”

She frowns, “Who put Thermosteel in you?”

“A priest while I was in the choir, how did you know I use that euphemism?”

“I’m serious, Ren.”

Rennin holds up both his hands palms away from her showing her the unnatural difference, “You see the symmetry in my right hand and pretty regular left one?”

“They replaced your arm, yes.”

“My left leg too, and part of my skull. You hadn’t noticed my left eye glows in the dark like a small novelty diaphragm?”

Her face cringes slightly, “No, I guess not. But it doesn’t explain bullet proof bones.”

“The limbs Caufmann grafted onto me are too heavy for my skeleton to support, so he injected me with Thermosteel.”

She arches an eyebrow. “I heard that stuff is worth seven million a kilo.”

Rennin finds himself smirking, “We *can* rebuild him, we *have* the technology,” he quotes from the Six Million Dollar Man. Judging from Carla’s expression, she doesn’t watch TV shows from three and a half centuries ago. She must have some kind of life outside work or something.

“I’m *assuming* that’s a line from a movie.”

Close enough. “You got me.” He sighs lightly and looks at her with a warm smile or at least as warm as he can manage. “We have to leave this city.”

She nods. “Where though?”

“It doesn’t matter. *How* is the real question.”

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Another day passes. The hit squads have been out around the clock. Their execution count has climbed into the thousands. The public aren’t as stupid as the grunts thought they were. Several have caught on to what is going on, though they still can’t do anything.

The military have labelled the bodies contagious, and have openly admitted that they are removing bodies that have fallen victim to the disease. At least at first it worked just fine but the press received a letter from Doctor Mepida Rethrin that changed all that.

Caufmann was covered in various forms of gore from the lab when he found out and left immediately for Rethrin’s quarters.

He ignores the opportunity to be civilised and knock, bypassing the locking mechanism almost on arrival. The door flies up into the bulkhead, waking both occupants. Rethrin’s roommate is up in an instant only wearing his underpants, visibly winding himself up to make a complaint when Caufmann grabs his wrist and literally throws him out of the room. He unceremoniously thumps into the wall across the hall, sliding into a stunned, uncoordinated pile.

The door slams down when Caufmann hits the plate, and for a second he and Rethrin are left alone in the dark. Rethrin feels something like terror grip her, as Caufmann appears as some demonic, glowing eyed spectre in front of her bunk for at least a moment before the lights come on.

Rethrin stands up, folding her arms over herself, feeling terribly

exposed. Caufmann's gaze is fixed on her face.

She opens her mouth to speak. What she receives is a backhand so hard it throws her back onto her bed. A trickle of blood runs out of the corner of her mouth, but her face is still riddled with conviction. Caufmann holds up a scrunched copy of the letter she wrote to the press office.

She grits her teeth, "They deserve to know, William."

His face screws up into a snarl. Rethrin sees more wrinkles cross his face than she has ever seen before. "I don't care that you sent it! It's irrelevant now. You told them *I made it*!"

It's the first time she's ever heard him yell.

For a moment she's a little confused. He's not upset about her leaking information, that people have died for revealing a glimpse of, he's upset she said he designed the affliction. "William… you didn't? You *really* didn't?"

"Of *course* not! You… you idiot!" he turns away, beyond speechless. He takes several deep, calming breaths.

"I can't think of anyone else in the world who could have possibly done it."

He turns to face her. "Do you believe for one second that I'd have made something this faulty?"

Rethrin's scientific mind clicks on and she forgets about her throbbing jaw. "Faulty? It's perfect. According to calculations the entire world could be overrun in a little under a year. Complete conversion."

"It's not perfect. I've discovered a weakness in the contaminants that is quite crippling, but I've no idea how to exploit it. Plus I would never have let it out without a cure. I'd never make *anything* that sacrificed intelligence for obedience."

"What weakness? What do you mean by obedience?" asks Rethrin.

"Some people see a particular reflection of light and it induces an epileptic fit."

"That's very rare, but yes."

"The contaminants seem to react to certain colours with a phobic response," says Caufmann.

"They're afraid of colour?" she doesn't even bother to hide her scepticism.

"More or less."

"Pity Raddocks Horizon is such a dreary temperate zone and almost always rainy."

Caufmann smiles, "Yes, it is," and almost instantly his smile vanishes to a rather cold expression. "You understand you'll have to leave, don't you?"

Rethrin looks at the floor for a moment thinking then looks back to him. “Yes. I thought you were here to kill me.”

Caufmann removes a syringe from his jacket pocket. “I was, yes.” He puts it away. “Since your actions would normally result in a death sentence and I have another here who also wouldn’t be allowed to live if discovered, I think you can help each other.”

Rethrin frowns with a questioning look, “I’m sorry?”

“I need you to leave this city tonight, and I want you to take a deserter from the HolinMech Warrior unit.”

Rethrin stands up very slowly looking at Caufmann’s eyes. “Arca Drej? He’s here?”

Caufmann nods.

Rethrin shakes her head, “I can’t take him.”

“This isn’t exactly open for debate.”

“William, martial law is going to be in place tomorrow. Before I can even get out of this city I have to dock at the Skyhook, and they *will* do a ship scan as well as test me for infection. If they find Arca Drej on board… well you might as well just kill me now.”

The Skyhook has been commandeered by the Iyatoya lunar base that houses the HolinMech android special forces team. There are several Skyhook bases located around the continent, which have now converged above Raddocks Horizon and latched onto each other, creating a bigger base of operations to combat the plague.

Caufmann makes a rumbling noise at the back of his throat, “Very well.”

“I can’t take him and run either. If I leave via Gateway, I’ll be shipped to the Outbound housing zone. The military would take one look at Drej and know he’s an android. Or if I take a ship and escape, they will detect an andronic construct aboard my vessel, ask questions and then shoot us down.”

Caufmann’s left eye twitches just slightly. “Mm,” he nods, “he’s been through a lot. He couldn’t pass for human.”

“I’m sorry, William.”

Caufmann looks at her for a long moment then rolls up his sleeve and presses a button on his forearm. A moment later he speaks, his voice projected from every PA in the Godyssey Lab. “Attention, this is Doctor William Caufmann, Head of Genetic Research. As of 9AM tomorrow morning, the staff restrictions are lifted from both the Experimental and Incubation sections. Watchman Crew, stand down.”

He clicks off his forearm and turns to leave. The door flies up and he’s out in the hall where Rethrin’s roommate is nursing a broken arm and a quickly swelling and bruising face where his head collided with the wall.

Rethrin follows him out. “William, what about our families?”

“Make sure they’re at Gateway in two days.”

“Why?”

“All immediate relatives of essential Godyssey employees and the military are allowed to leave if they pass a medical scan.”

Caufmann stops walking when Rethrin grabs his arm. “So any of the military and our staff can get out of this city?”

“Yes, if you’re in the research division or a soldier, your family gets out if they scan clean.”

Rethrin nods.

“Your husband will be fine. Now get dressed.” Without bothering to see if she’s embarrassed, he turns to walk off only to find Rennin standing right in his way.

“Rennin,” he says in mild surprise.

“I noticed your handiwork,” he says tilting head to gaze past Caufmann to the downed man who’s being attended to by a couple of staff. “Nice.”

“Can I help you, Ren?”

“Well I was here to execute Doctor Whistleblower.”

Caufmann spots Killjoy in Rennin’s hand. “That won’t be necessary.”

Rennin nods and salutes with the gun. “She’s got some good information.”

“I have things to do, Rennin.”

“Can I have the afternoon off?”

Caufmann gets the feeling Rennin is up to something. “What? Why?”

Rennin’s artificial eye gives nothing away, but his human eye is overly focussed. “Please?” He mimics the infamous puppy eyes trick most kids try on their mothers.

Caufmann is mildly unsettled, “Very well.”

Rennin steps a little closer to him, “Have I told you that I love you lately?”

“Get out, Rennin.”

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Confident his humour has disarmed Caufmann’s suspicions, Rennin leaves the lab without a moment to waste. The streets are almost bare. Of the few people outside, some look horrendously ill, whilst others look fine.

The compound accepting the uninfected in Centre-city is up and running. The people who didn’t qualify for a ticket out are queuing up outside. The Horizon Military have efficiently fortified enough room

for almost twenty thousand people. Rennin wonders how many of these checkpoints are currently in operation.

Several skyscrapers fall within the confines of the compound, overseen by two Desolator satellites. They are stationed above the compound itself to defend against potential group attacks from hostiles, but so far the general public has not been made aware of that.

Arriving at the Army Recruitment building, Rennin enters the massive dome structure. It is filled with waiting people, slumped in the chairs or leaning against support pillars.

Rennin walks up to one of the several dozen people at the recruitment counters sniggering to himself, not believing they could possibly need a building this elaborate for any practical reason.

He waits in line for nearly half an hour as the dozen or so people in front sign their lives away, hopefully to die quietly without having to show up on news updates and interrupt his TV programs.

The plain, featureless, probably useless soldier sitting behind the desk looks up at the forty-something year old in front of him. “Yes, sir?”

“Do I look like your sergeant?”

The soldier doesn’t react. *Probably hasn’t changed his nappy, or his initiation involved some rectal batteries,* Rennin sniggers, *or battering, judging by his age.*

“I just have some questions. I want to know how this getting-out-of-the-city thing works. Is it all Godyssey staff can evacuate or what?”

The soldier, whose nametag says Tyrone, rolls his eyes ever so slightly. “Godyssey Lab employees can evacuate with their families as a first priority. Godyssey security must stay, families can evacuate through regular channels. Godyssey *Military* can evacuate their families *only*,” he says slowly enough for a triple-concussed football player to have to time to process each word.

Rennin does need a little time to process it though. His face is set in stone. “Better sign me up.”

“You’re a little old, aren’t you?”

“I prefer ‘veteran’.”

“Name?”

“Rennin Elizabeth Farrow.”

Tyrone can’t repress a smirk while typing it into his console. His face turns to surprise as he starts reading what turns up. “Eight years as a CryoZaiyon Standard, served under Lieutenant Saifer Veidan… fought the Invasion of China, three peacekeeping missions, two occupations, four months in the Sieges under Valhara. *The* Valhara?” Tyrone asks looking up with wide eyes.

Rennin nods.

“What was she like?”

“Don’t remember,” he lies.

“That bad?” the soldier asks.

“Depends what you mean by bad. It’s hard to describe,” Rennin says, images of the Jupiter Sieges flooding his mind. “Forgal was so strong. I remember him being,” he trails for a moment, “impossible.”

Tyrone is frozen in place watching Rennin rotate his hands as he searches for the words.

“But seeing Valhara in that final battle, she was a juggernaut. She wore a Serriform Warsuit; looked like a meat grinder. Pretty appropriate for her, really.

“Io and Europa tore each other to pieces, I remember looking up at the shields. Two worlds at war. They broke us.

“At the brink of it all, she was at the centre of the madness. Every goddamn shot they took seemed to hit her, but she didn’t go down. I can hear her scream like it’s carved its own note into my skull. I saw Valhara take shots that would have levelled city blocks, and she just didn’t stop. Each hit seemed to drive her on. When she reached their line it was a fucking massacre. I saw her pick a trooper up, and the amount of energy she was emitting set him alight in her hand.

“How could Forgal, or anyone, be stronger than that? It was like watching a god.”

“Is that where Commander Valhara died?”

Rennin shrugs himself out of his reminiscence. “I was shipped out, wounded.”

Tyrone continues reading, “Fought in Russia, America, and helped defend Raddocks Horizon during the attempted occupation. Unofficially awarded the Andron Cross and Undine Spire. Those are for androids, aren’t they?”

“Usually. Forgal Lauros gave me his medals for the campaign in Ireland and the closing fight in the Jupiter Sieges.”

Tyrone blinks and shakes his head. “This is… an intense amount of combat. It says here you survived the destruction of the capital ship, the HMAS Possession.”

An image of the Possession exploding from through the view-port of an escape pod enters Rennin’s mind unbidden.

“Yes, we were the rear guard for a grossly outnumbered fleet. Most of us didn’t make it.” Rennin takes a breath and shudders away the memory of the men that died from the pod he was in.

“Well with this record I’m sure you’ll be accepted without much trouble. I don’t know about your sergeant rank being restored, the army has changed a lot in the last twenty years.”

Horse shit. “I see.”

“We’ll get you scanned for infection and a quick physical.”

Three hours later and after explaining his various android parts, his rank of sergeant is restored dependent on his reading the rules of engagement text book, but he's more or less got the job. His infection level turned up inconclusive once, then negative, then inconclusive, then negative.

He passed his psychiatric test as the picture of mental health, so perfect in fact that they had to retest him. The lieutenant asking the questions figured he merely knew what to say, but since his scores say he has passed, there's not much that can be done.

The lieutenant doesn't like him. Rennin doesn't like any of them. None of them would like him if they figured out he killed three of them barely a few nights before. He curses himself in the army dome several times for his own thoughtlessness; he still carries Logan's gun since the night he threw him out of Carla's apartment window.

He is having a great deal of internal conflict about getting rid of it because it is such a brilliantly crafted weapon. Though its customisation makes it, therefore, recognizable.

Rennin gets back to his apartment in the Godyssey complex to find Carla bundled up on the couch playing some of his most violent video games. She's chosen to fight on the aliens' side and is butchering the human side. Clearly she hasn't quite dealt with being a military target for execution.

She looks over to him and he sees the veins in her face and most of her neck have returned to normal. He is about to say hello when the power goes out.

7.
Mettle Skin

Pharaoh Drake wasn't paying attention when the citywide blackout hit Raddocks Horizon. The entire grid went down at once, and has remained out for nearly two hours. The backup power supply hasn't even kicked in. There was no warning, no backup and there is no power at all.

Drake is strapped to a chair, deep scratches running down the sides of his face. Serro is outside his observation room, looking at his friend's fingers that are caked with his own blood.

He hasn't recovered from his first hit mission with the Tasker child and mother. Before being sent on a second mission, Serro advised Captain Kowalski not to assign Drake until he'd been counselled and properly evaluated. Unfortunately, time was of the essence. Drake made it as far as the target's house before he went berserk. In his mad panic he shot Mia Saker, before attacking the rest of his team. If it wasn't for her body armour she would have been killed.

He was wrestled down and put back in the RV, but once alone he began tearing at himself as if his skin wasn't his. He broke every window and mirror, fracturing his own wrist in the process. Sedation has left his head is lolling from side to side. Serro sighs and looks across at Mia. "What would you do?"

Mia huffs, her pale brown eyes quickly appraising Serro. They are sharp as a knife. "Drake is one of those moral unfortunates. Might have been kinder to shoot him."

Despite her relatively young appearance, Mia Saker is well into her thirties and is extremely pragmatic, certainly well chosen for the HolinMech Program. Serro can't help but wonder if she's being serious about executing him. "Would you do it?"

She pauses for a moment looking at Drake through the glass. "No. But looking at him is just… shit. Look at him," she gestures with her hand, "he's gone."

"Did you know Caufmann wants him taken to the lab immediately?"

Mia's head cocks slightly, her eyebrows pressing together to make a face that challenges Serro's question. "Why?"

He shrugs, "He didn't say. You ever met him?"

"Caufmann? No. Don't want to."

"Well you're taking Drake over there."

"No I'm not."

“I’m not going there. I’m your superior, so get moving.”

Mia glares at him, “I can shoot your nuts off from three kilometres away.”

“Only because it’s a big target.”

“Anything looks big in 3000x zoom, Hopper.”

Before long she’s driving through the streets. Without power it’s like travelling through a ghost town. The streets are deserted. In the darkness, all the looming buildings make it look like some kind of gothic nightmare. Mia can’t remember ever being in a blackout.

All vehicles in the city are usually connected to the electrical grid. Without the power signal to tell the organic compound engines to run, all cars are useless without an alternate power source. There is only a limited amount of petroleum left that is capable of running vehicle engines the old fashioned way, and Mia has been allotted a single tank of it.

She’d only ever smelled real petrol once before, when cleaning out her grandfather’s garage after he died. She doesn’t miss the aroma at all. She can’t stand colognes either. As far as she’s concerned, they all stink like embalming fluid.

It is well into the night by the time her RV pulls up at the Godyssey Laboratory gates. The lab has emergency lights on, so obviously has it’s own generator. The watchman is waiting. He approaches the gate, one eye glowing unsettlingly. “Yes?”

Mia sticks her head out the window. “Open up! I’ve got Drake in the back.”

“That’s wonderful.”

This must be Rennin Farrow, Mia thinks with a mental sigh. “Caufmann ordered him here.”

“Does he come with chips?”

“Open the gate.”

“Identify yourself.”

“Mia Saker, Beta HolinMech.”

“Serial number?”

“What’s the point of that? No electrical equipment is working citywide, you can’t verify it.”

“I suppose only military are capable of driving around. I’m just not thrilled about having to open the gate with this,” he holds up a crank.

“Well I’m not thrilled about being here at all.”

As Rennin begins winding it open he eyes the car, “Is that a combustion engine I smell, or are you just wearing unleaded as a deodorant?”

“Unleaded?”

“The last time I remember smelling that shit was years ago at the

Fusion Grand Prix. Couldn't you guys afford hydrogen?"

"Apparently this stuff is easier to synthesize, it's not actually fossil fuel."

Rennin laughs, "Yeah, hydrogen is really hard to get being the most common element in the universe."

"The fuel is easy enough but when was the last time you saw a hydrogen engine?" asks Mia.

"To be honest I don't know."

"That's because they're two centuries out of date, a little on the dangerous side in a firefight since hydrogen explodes when it contacts oxygen. We're not sure of the extent of the blackout or even how it happened. And these old engines aren't connected to a grid and they're impossible to remotely hack," she says, clearly losing patience.

Rennin grins, "I like you."

Mia winces.

"Not like that. I'm spoken for."

"Lucky her."

A moment later, the gate has been cranked open, allowing Mia to drive in. She takes Drake out of the back of the RV. He's been strapped to a wheelchair, and is luckily still sedated.

Wheeling him in the front doors and through the front foyer of the lab complex, she finds Doctor Jellan Roths waiting. The surgeon is looking a little pale. Mia has heard she is infected, but rumours aren't to be trusted.

The Beta HolinMech nods a greeting before Roths leads her to an observation room deeper in the lab, where Caufmann awaits in a room that looks more like a cell. It's lined with soundproofing soft pads. Mia stops for a moment wondering what Caufmann has in mind for Drake.

He waves her in with some kind of faux-smile, some mock attempt to settle her doubts. This is the first time she's ever seen him.

And she can already feel her trigger finger twitching.

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Rennin walks back up the clock tower where Wayne Carr is sitting with Carla. He knew he had to get back to the lab as soon as he could when the blackout hit. All the doors have to be open and closed with manual latches. Wayne looks up, "Look, Rennin, I don't think you should have brought her here," he says, turning to Carla. "Nothing against you, it's just against the rules."

Carla smiles. She tries to make it as polite as possible but every time she looks at Wayne's nametag, she can't help but smirk.

Rennin arches an eyebrow, "Jeez, Wank, I didn't think you'd pass

up the opportunity to talk to a woman that doesn't require inflating."

"We could get in trouble."

"Actually we can do *anything*, there isn't a surveillance camera up and running anywhere in this stinking city. I mean honestly, just listen," he makes a sweeping hand gesture.

A long pause ensues.

"To what?" Wayne eventually asks.

"Exactly, Tonnes of Fun. Nothing. No hum of electricity, no buzz of technology, no car engines whirring, not even the barely perceptible drone of wireless signals, radio waves and all that other stuff flying around we don't consciously notice."

"Why do I get the feeling you're enjoying this?" asks Carla.

"And *none* of the solar batteries are working," Rennin says looking out the tower window trying to see anything past the gates.

"Whoever cut the power knew exactly how to," says Wayne.

"And what else is bizarre: two hours and no looting."

Wayne huffs, "There has been looting."

"Not on the scale that's the median, particularly for a city this size."

"Martial Law keeps most people indoors," says Wayne.

"Good *god*, the good Lord's bitter joke on the world makes a good point."

Carla makes the stern face at him. "Is it necessary to be such a prick?"

"Don't knock it until you try it. Go on, tease him, it really helps."

Despite Wayne's unfortunate appearance, he does have a pair of eyes that can melt hearts, which he turns on Carla with an expression that would remelt Antarctica. Carla feels like she's defending a hurt puppy. "Rennin, lay off him."

Rennin straightens his belt. "I'd lay him off given half a chance."

"You'd *lay* him, Rennin, that's not the same thing."

"Don't be stupid… his tits aren't big enough."

"The space between your ears is," says Wayne drawing an unexpected laugh from Carla.

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In the lab, Caufmann has Drake in the Chair. Mia and Roths are still in the room but Mia looks like she doesn't want to leave. Drake is still mostly unconscious, until Caufmann jabs him with a syringe. The Beta HolinMech jolts awake with fright. "What…"

"Doctor Roths, Miss Saker, excuse us. Now."

Mia remains still but Roths firmly grips her arm, leading her out

of the room. When the door seals shut behind them, nothing can be heard. Drake looks up at Caufmann. “Where am I?”

“Godyssey Laboratory, level three. You’ve suffered a slight breakdown.”

“Slight? I shot my own friend.”

Caufmann smiles, “I’ve killed several of mine.”

That catches Drake off guard but he doesn’t let it show. “What am I doing here?”

“I ordered you be brought here. You’ve been declared unfit to serve in Beta HolinMech during your induced sleep and I know enough about your father to know he’ll react quite… poorly to this news.”

“What does my father have to do with any of this?”

“You’ll get your chance to ask him but I have a job for you. Absolute secrecy is essential.”

Drake shakes his head, “I can’t. I can’t do anything right now. And I’ve heard about you, no way am I doing anything for you.”

“You don’t exactly have a choice. It’s do this job for me, or end up where you were going to be taken before I had you brought here. The asylum.”

Drake clenches his jaw. “I deserve it.”

“Irrelevant. I know you’ve voiced serious concerns about Godyssey’s conduct regarding its employees and their treatment of the androids. And have only voiced these concerns because your father will pay any price to keep you in Godyssey’s control. A curious thing, isn’t it?” When Drake doesn’t respond he continues. “You can do something good now. I need a HolinMech deserter taken out of this city.”

That gets Drake’s attention. “I’m sorry? There’s only one HolinMech that’s…” he trails off as it dawns on him. “He’s here?”

Caufmann nods, “And very frightened.”

“How do you know I won’t tell anyone?”

“Because you’re insane. Who’s going to believe you?”

“Everyone, because everyone knows you’re screwed up.”

Caufmann eyes him closely. “You murder hundreds of people and you’re called a butcher, yet never to your face. But when you try saving lives, everyone has something to say about how you’re going about it wrong or how you’ll fail. Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” says Drake quietly.

“Yes you do. It’s because anyone trying to do any kind of good is an easy target. It’s why husbands beat their wives. Their own inherent incompetence and lack of confidence manifests into violence against something perceived to be weaker, and there’s nothing easier to hurt than someone who loves you.”

“And you know everything, do you?”

“I know you shot Mia Saker when you could have taken your anger out on those responsible if you were so inclined, but that’s too difficult isn’t it? Best to take it out on your friends because they’re less likely to see it coming,” says Caufmann in a derisive tone.

“You need to stop talking.”

“It’s nothing to be *ashamed* of, we’re all guilty of it on some level. It’s a survival instinct but some are simply more cowardly than others.”

“What do you want from me?”

“I told you. You will take this HolinMech out of Raddocks Horizon.”

“How?” asks Drake.

“I don’t care.”

“It won’t work.”

Caufmann grits his teeth but remains calm. “The Skyhook will not be alerted and even if it is, it will not have the resources to chase one small ship. The HolinMech’s transponder has been cut out and there is a sarcophagus I have designed that can mask androids from close range scans.”

Drake huffs a laugh. “Chase? They won’t chase, they’ll just shoot us down.”

Caufmann hates to admit it but Drake is right, the entire idea is insane. “We have an entrance to the sewer systems but Prototype might be down there. We’ve been receiving some bizarre readings from various locations.”

“You said everyone’s going to go insane and start attacking everything so why not just let him go in the confusion?”

“He’s frail,” says Caufmann tapping his temple.

Drake looks stunned. “You want me to see a crazed deserter android and *take* it out of the city?”

“Do you need everything explained to you more than twice?”

“What do I do if he attacks me? I can’t wrestle a combat ready soldier robot.”

Caufmann turns away for a moment thinking fiercely. “You can with some help.”

“Why does it have to be me?”

Caufmann produces a syringe from his pocket containing a clear fluid. “You have two options. You can do this for me, or the contents of this hypo will dictate your future.”

“Poison?”

“My work is delicate. Poison is crude. Inside this needle is a substance colloquially known as Mind Killer. It’s an agent that simply stops your brain from performing certain tasks requiring the cortex.

It's the chemical equivalent of an archaic procedure called the Transorbital Lobotomy. It's quite permanent and negates the necessity for constant sedation."

Drake's head instinctively moves back from Caufmann. "*That's* my choice?"

"I was ordered by a Godyssey founding member to use this on you. Godyssey superiors obviously don't want the scandal of a Founder's son shooting up their own soldiers to get out."

"My father," Drake nearly spits.

Caufmann shakes his head. "Orders such as those don't come with names, just the specific action to be taken. This choice is my offer, not theirs."

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Outside the room, Doctor Roths and Mia Saker watch through the glass like it's a television on mute. Caufmann paces back and forth, Drake sits strapped into the wheelchair looking up with those deep self-inflicted scratches scoring his face. Mia doesn't really care about being shot in the chest, she is just concerned about her comrade.

Being killed as a Beta HolinMech is one of the ways to a fast promotion to become an android. In her opinion, androids are the real deal, the best of the absolute best. She will be the first female HolinMech Warrior.

Mia sometimes feels a little like Drake's big sister. She jumped at the chance of becoming a Beta HolinMech and is scheduled to replace a HolinMech Warrior called Joseph Yomak. Drake was forced to sign on with the Beta HolinMechs and being forced into such a thing is akin to a death sentence.

Mia sighs, "I know you're probably tired of impatient soldiers hanging around but what do you think Caufmann wants with him?"

"William never wastes his own time so it's probably important."

"I can't imagine anyone calling him by a first name."

Roths smiles slightly, "He really can be a good friend."

Mia looks at her incredulously for a moment. "Well if he gets Drake killed or experiments on him he's dead."

Roths laughs, "Yes… of course."

"This blackout has left a lot of our contingents across the city vulnerable. How could the city's entire power supply not have a back up?"

Roths grumbles, "It does. Two backups. The primary and ancillaries were all cut at exactly the same time."

"I couldn't help but notice you guys still have power at the lab. I

assume you have your own generator?"

"Yes, not a quarter of what we require to run the whole lab, but our most precious projects can still be kept running. What are your weapons systems going to do with the grid down?"

Mia shrugs, "We have a limited supply of petrol to run our vehicles, but the gunships are not set to Raddocks Horizon's power cluster so they're still usable. Our ground vehicles are mostly useless. That said, all our tactical targeting equipment is stuffed without the satellite relays so we're down to line of sight. All missile tracking and things like that are gone."

"The satellites are down too?" asks Roths, genuinely surprised.

"No, but when the power went down they became erratic and began providing incorrect data. Apparently it's some kind of virus uploaded from several places at once. Our handheld rocket launcher lock on systems still work and things on independent circuits but anything wired to the Defence Force system is out of action."

Roths shakes her head. "We told the Defence Force to let William handle their firewalls."

"We've had teams deployed in the sewer system for the last few days. There's some seriously irregular readings from down there."

"Yes, we've been trying to get a unit sent to find whatever it is. We've recorded odd readings there too for the last week or so."

"Is it the progenitor-class?"

"Sometimes we think it is, but other times it reads as some sort of signal that's just producing petabytes of data. Its location is always different, and varied in intensity. We had a clear reading once and a direct lock on but when we got to the location it was a domestic computer and certainly not capable of absorbing data from NASA. Even when their IT techs took the PC apart they couldn't find any evidence of anything unusual," says Roths.

Mia frowns, "I've heard something about a ghost in the machine in this city. Personally I figured it was just you guys prying into everyone's business."

Carla, Rennin and Wayne are still sitting in the tower drinking coffee. Carla looks at her phone from time to time, hoping for some kind of signal, but without city power and with inference affecting the satellites, all phones are inactive.

Wayne is reading half a torn newspaper and Rennin is reading the other half. The two ripped it while fighting over it earlier, not caring in the least that it was Carla's paper to begin with.

“Hey,” Rennin starts, “it says here that brain cells are basically the same as fat cells.”

Carla prepares for the punch line. “Really…”

“Hard to believe that all this time, Bins of Skin here is really a genius,” he points at Wayne’s robust stomach.

“Oh ha-ha, Rennin,” says Wayne.

“I’m just trying to cheer you up.”

Carla snorts, “You’re an arsehole.”

Rennin grins, “He hasn’t said much all day.”

“I’m just feeling down,” says Wayne.

“I’ve got a spare bra,” Rennin says, receiving a prompt slap from Carla.

“I can’t get my family out of Raddocks Horizon,” he says, the comment causing an oppressive silence in the room.

Rennin’s head lowers a bit. “I’m sorry, Wayne.”

“Godyssey Security isn’t important enough, it seems, and I’m too heavy for the military. I don’t know what to do,” he says looking at his wedding band.

Rennin doesn’t feel remorse very often, and he can’t stand it when he does. “We’re leaving too, you could come with us.”

“Yes, absolutely, come with us. I’ll be back in just a tick,” says Carla stepping into the toilet cubicle near the door, fumbling with the latch Rennin broke previously.

When Rennin hears the door lock he continues. “I signed on with the Horizon Military this afternoon just so Carla gets out.”

“What about her family?”

“My parents and siblings are dead so I should be able to put hers in their place if I make enough of a scene.”

“How will that get my family out?”

“I have to stay behind with the Defence Force but I’ve got no intention of going through the meat grinder with those jarhead rejects. I’m deserting and I’m getting out of here if I have to burn the city down. We can go together.” He wants to break his own nose for making this offer, but his mouth just won’t stop, “Carla doesn’t know I’m not leaving with her, so please don’t say anything.”

“I do appreciate the offer but I can’t accept.”

Thank God! “Why?”

“What if the infected really do go hostile? What if they come after us? How will I know you won’t shoot one of us to use as bait?”

The toilet flushes in the background and Rennin’s eyes flicker. “Well—”

“Would you?” Wayne asks directly.

“It’s…” he takes a deep breath, “possible.”

The toilet door opens and Carla steps out. “You two look intense,

did I miss something?"

"I professed my undying devotion to him," Rennin says, leaning back.

"What the hell happened in the bathroom? It stinks of bleach and my eyes are burning."

"I was sick and wanted to make sure it was clean," Rennin says.

"What did you do? Hose it down?" asks Carla.

A cry for help at street level draws their attention to the tower window. The three of them stand and lean towards the glass to peer out.

It's pitch black.

Rennin risks draining the generator a little more by increasing the power to the lights on the outer wall of the lab compound. They can now at least see the street. He gives them more power, illuminating the surrounding area.

A hundred metres down the road, a man is tripping over himself in a frantic run. Another man, hunched posture, is chasing him down the street. His unusual gait is setting Rennin's teeth on edge.

The watchman grabs his rifle and trains its sights on the fleeing man, seeing that he's been wounded in the abdomen. The hunching figure giving chase lets out an animalistic roar before performing a leap over an impossible distance for a human. It lands on the man's back, bringing him to the ground and looks to be biting at his throat.

Rennin swears, while taking a shot more off reflex than anything. The biter is hit in the back of the head, killing it instantly.

Everyone in the tower is speechless and even more so when the man who was fleeing stands back up and calls for help again. Carla comments that Rennin must have saved him.

From what? What the hell was that?

Rennin remains silent while training his scope on the screaming man who doesn't seem wounded at the throat after all. His face doesn't even appear scared. It's a peculiarly vacant expression.

He begins running a few metres one way crying for help then runs a few metres in another direction calling for help again. He keeps doing this, again and again, running then stopping and screaming. Wayne asks what's wrong with him. Rennin and Carla are silently transfixed by the strange man. There's no one else on the streets.

What's he yelling for?

After a minute of this, another man comes running up to the screamer. Judging by his body language, he's just trying to provide aid. Despite clearly not being hostile, the wounded screamer continues yelling for help, almost like he doesn't even see him.

Out of nowhere, four others are on the streets, hunched over and running straight for the man who's trying to comfort the screamer.

Rennin manages a curse as the four grab the Samaritan, carrying him off down the alleyway next to the Perseverance pub across the street.

Rennin drops his rifle, switches the courtyard lights up to maximum, and makes a move for the door, “Wayne, keep her here,” and he’s on his way down the tower stair.

As he runs across the courtyard, he curses again realising he has to crank the gate open by hand. Relying on his combat chassis left leg he springs off the ground and manages to grip the crossbar at the top of the gate to hoist himself over. He lands hard onto the footpath, draws Killjoy and runs towards the alley following the pained, horrified screams.

Once he get to the mouth of the alley, silence descends from within.

It’s as dark as anything Rennin has ever seen. He doesn’t have a torch and doesn’t even know what he’s doing or what to expect. His android eye can see far enough to make his way up the alley without too much trouble, but his visual range is a few metres at best.

Occasionally some shadows dance about from the street as the screamer runs back and forth. The further up the alley he goes the more blood he finds, until finally he reaches a dead end. Wads of flesh are flung all over the walls and ground.

No sign of the people who dragged the poor guy in here to be killed but upon looking at the stone walls on either side there are fresh scratches in the stonework, always four parallel at a time, leading up the wall. *So they can climb walls*, Rennin thinks grimly.

Rennin heads back to the road slowly, frowning when he sees the screamer still running in random directions yelling for help. Rennin watches him closely for a few moments. He has wide white eyes with no pupils and thick, black protruding veins snaking up the back of his neck to the base of his skull. Something terrible dawns on Rennin as he watches this man.

“An ambush,” he whispers to himself, shooting the screamer in the face to leave an uncomfortably thick silence all around him.

It is then that Rennin notices a couple of people up the street just within sight range before complete blackness. Rennin’s instinct demands him to flee so he turns, finding another two up the other end of the street. He looks left back to the first two that are still stationary but they look closer. He turns back to the right and the others are closer too.

Dinner time…

He feels panic making a desperate push to overwhelm him as he turns left, finding the pair closer again, this time close enough to see their white, dead eyes. The sound of wet footsteps running from the alley behind him freezes his blood, prompting him to run for the lab

gates. He throws Killjoy over then leaps up, grabbing the crossbar in an effort to throw himself over. He cries out in surprise as something grabs at his left boot. Kicking himself free, he finishes his climb and drops down on the other side.

He lands a little unsteadily, straightening up to see a pair of white eyes. They stare out of a dead face, looking back at him from no more than a foot away. Rennin swears in shock as a hand comes reaching through the bars. He dodges its grasp, stumbling away from the gate only to trip on his own feet, falling flat on his back next to Killjoy. He grabs the gun and gets to his feet, finding all four infected staring through the bars at him from various places on the road. Not moving, just staring. The silence envelops him again.

The watchman turns his back, intentionally looking away but he can feel their eyes on him as he walks back to the clock tower and up the stairs. When he gets back in the tower room Carla half leaps out of her seat. “Are you alright? Why did you shoot that man?”

Rennin nods distantly, “That was no man.” He looks down and can see the four infected looking at the clock tower. There’s also a less human-looking fifth one at the mouth of the alleyway. He shivers.

Carla sees his left hand shaking but before she can take it he moves for his rifle, “Rennin?”

“One sec.”

He brings the glass shield down and takes aim, forcing himself not to acknowledge the contaminants all looking right at him in unison. The first one he takes out is at the mouth of the alley, the one who gave him the biggest scare. The next is the one at the gate, then the others. He brings the glass shield up and slumps down in his chair, his left hand still shaking.

Carla takes the rifle and leans it against the desk, then takes his hand. “What happened?”

“Those mongrels set a trap. The screamer was the bait. Infected but not hostile, didn’t even seem to know anyone was there.”

“Did you find the guy they carried off?” asks Wayne.

“Some of him,” says Rennin noticing the early makings of a shiner on Wayne’s right eye. “What the hell happened to you?”

Wayne glances at Carla. “When you went into the alley, she went to stop you, I grabbed her and she belted me.”

Carla can’t suppress a smirk, “Take the compliment, Rennin, I guess I like you.”

Rennin smiles then looks at his co-worker, “Thanks, Wank,” he coughs, “Wayne, I owe you one.”

Over the next hour, some of the Horizon Military are called to secure the lab area whilst the Godyssey team from below decks bag the bodies and take them inside the lab compound to be incinerated in

the basement.

Caufmann hasn't bothered showing his face upstairs. He is with Del, who is now seated in the Chair, the upper back section of his skull removed to run further diagnostics. Caufmann has been examining some system designs from the past that have developed serious coding problems in the programming. He didn't even hear Doctor Roths enter and start talking to him.

She shakes him, "William."

Caufmann blinks a couple of times then looks at her. "Something wrong?"

"We had a shooting outside. The watchman killed six people."

"Yes I know, but they are not people," he amends.

"How are we going to present this?"

Caufmann exhales. "Presentation is not the concern anymore. Tomorrow there will be hundreds of attacks like that."

"What do we do?" asks Roths.

"We wait and respond where we can."

Roths bites her lip briefly. "What kind of losses are we talking about?"

"About eighty percent of the city populace."

She blinks slowly letting that sink in. "That's nothing short of a catastrophe. That's millions of people."

"That estimate is with both Del and Adrenin active."

"And if they're not?"

Caufmann hesitates. "Best leave tonight."

"How far away is Del from being completed?"

Caufmann slumps in his seat slightly. "Further than I had hoped. Simulated Instinctual Clusters never work, I knew that and I tried one anyway. Even with the modifications to it, it's still a mess even though some things have started working."

Roths frowns, "What modifications?"

"I added something to the IC unit to give the algorithm more to work with."

"I thought you said Del was not to have an IC from a human host."

"He still doesn't, he just has a little extra substance."

Roths looks at him firmly. "What did you do *exactly*?"

Caufmann glances away momentarily but refocusses on her. "We had a lot of excess tissue, living tissue, from Rennin's operation."

Roths' mouth drops, "You used *Rennin Farrow's* genetic material and blended it with Del?" she almost screeches.

"This is why I didn't mention it," he sighs. "There was more than enough to compress and use."

"Del was working perfectly before."

“Only when his combat protocols weren’t engaged. He has excessive programming to deal with the simulated IC unit but he just doesn’t function correctly so I added Rennin’s genetics to him. Now he works. The only problem is with the sudden influx of data from the IC unit, Del simply can’t balance all the information. The simulation IC is incompatible with his actual genetic data. We will have to *un*-program him, but he *works*. He really does, and since part of Rennin was added he’s even showing amazing aptitude with sniper rifles,” Caufmann says, smiling a little.

“Rennin is *insane*,” says Roths in a level but solid tone.

“Valhara was insane, Arca Drej went insane and only just before you came in did I work out why they, and some other androids, lost their minds.”

Roths’ face turns neutral as she decides to humour him. “Go on.”

“Arca and Valhara broke down for very different reasons, but the result was the same. Several others also went mad during the war and I finally discovered what they all have in common,” he pauses making sure Roths is listening.

“Today, William.”

“The IC unit wasn’t from their donor body.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The IC unit is supposed to be the instinct of a human being harnessed within a shell, yes?”

Roths nods.

“The android body is mostly artificial but their structure is relatively intact along with a lot of genetic material. The IC unit is built before the body dies to absorb and harness the life force. It’s been postulated that the life force trapped within the Instinctual Cluster is the consciousness itself,” he lets Roths absorb that for a moment before pressing on. “Now, genetic material stores memories and all sorts of anomalies relating to human life and evolution. The reason Arca, Valhara and others went mad is because the IC unit within them is not from the body the android is constructed from.”

“I’m not an expert on transmogrification and organic-mech crossover, you understand. How does that make any difference?”

Caufmann represses his frustration. “Imagine a soul literally ripped out of a living person and put back into a different body.”

“Soul?” she asks arching an eyebrow.

“Consciousness, then. Don’t argue semantics!”

“Very well,” she says dismissively.

“Imagine waking up tomorrow with someone else’s memories and without many of your own, just knowing something terrible has happened to you but never knowing which were the real memories you experienced yourself. Two halves of alternate wholes conflicting.”

Roths understands now. “I thought they didn’t remember anything.”

“Not in a literal sense, but the whole point of the Instinctual Cluster is to give them instinct, so they probably remember on some primal level. The genetic material still in the body clashes with the IC emissions. No program, no matter how clever or extreme, can possibly stop the breakdown once it begins.”

“Forgive me, William, but this does not help your argument regarding Del.”

“Del’s tissue is mostly synthetic. There is very little actual organic matter from the cloning. I wanted as little of the Suvaco genome in Del as possible.”

“But he still has Rennin’s… whatever it is, inside him. If you’re right about Arca and Valhara, then the same still applies to Del, regardless of how much or how little real genetic material is in him. He’ll still go mad.”

“I needed to use something and the tissue was there and ready.”

Roths narrows her eyes. “How bad were Rennin’s injuries?”

“Exactly as I stated in my report, apart from one.”

Roths closes her eyes.

“I needed brain matter, the head wound was severe so I took some.”

“*Took* some?”

“I replaced the pieces with synthetic equivalents. They will out perform his birth tissue and actually produce a small but constant flow of oxytocin. Apart from a general feeling of wellbeing, he’ll be none the wiser.”

“You cut out some of his brain. Part of Rennin’s *mind* is in Del.”

“You said Rennin is insane and you’re right, but that little bit of lunacy might be enough to balance the equation.”

“William, this is not a double negative making a positive, this is a fully armed machine programmed to kill and you’ve just given it the genes of a psychopath as a driving force.”

“We will see. The genetic material needed to be raw because cloned tissue invariably results in unstable processes,” Caufmann smirks and throws a switch on the control panel in front of him, restoring power to Del’s body. “Hello, Del, can you hear me?” he asks as the android’s head rises.

Yes, sir. Del displays across the screen in front of Caufmann and Roths.

Caufmann activates Del’s combat protocols. “Stand up.”

Yes, sir. He stands up, still attached to the mainframe by the dreadlock cables connected to his head.

Caufmann presses another switch and the wall to Del’s left slides

up, revealing a rack with dozens of weapons from knives to rocket launchers. “Pick up the S6-Grin,” he directs, referring to a snub nosed machine gun.

Acknowledged. Del doesn’t move.

“It’s on the wall to your left,” says Caufmann but Del doesn’t even answer this time. “Did you hear what I said?”

Yes, sir, I heard what you said.

Despite feeling a chill at Del’s statement, Roths sighs. “No change, and when he does select a weapon he can’t distinguish which targets to kill and which to protect.”

Caufmann ignores her. “Del, pick up the Sunbreaker Photon Beam Rifle.”

Del’s head turns slightly towards the rack and Caufmann feels a sudden rush of goosebumps meaning Del is using his sonar. The great android stands out of the chair and walks to the rack with silent, precise steps and picks the sniper rifle off the rack. Del then stands with it rested against his shoulder. *Ready.*

Caufmann smiles all too proudly and turns to face Roths. “You see, Doctor Roths? It’s only a matter of time.”

“How much time have we got here? We’re on emergency power as it is,” her eyes suddenly widen. “William…”

“It can’t be that far. It’s just a question of synchronization and deleting any unneeded code.”

“William, Del’s loading the rifle.”

Caufmann looks in the room to see Del sliding a positron clip into the receiver in front of the trigger. “Del, stand down.”

Del seems to ignore him and finishes loading the rifle.

Roths is frozen. “If Del cocks that rifle he’ll be holding the most lethal long-range gun ever built.”

Caufmann types on the console quickly and deactivates Del’s combat protocols. “Del, sit down.”

Yes, sir. Del places the rifle back on the rack and returns to the chair.

“What did you think of that?” asks Caufmann smiling again.

Roths looks at him as if he’s lost his mind. “Not very good, I’m sorry to say.”

“You missed it then.”

“Missed what?”

“I didn’t tell him to place the rifle back or to sit in the chair specifically. He’s operating off Instruction Only yet he did that on his own. Automatic response. That’s Rennin’s element.”

Roths shakes her head. “I know you’ve put an incredible amount of work into him but I think you’re grasping at straws. I’m sorry, but I think you should scrap the project. Focus on Adrenin,” she says, not

noticing Del's head flick up as a person's would who just realised they're being talked about.

Roths suddenly shivers as the skin on her arms horripilates again, but Caufmann didn't feel Del's sonar this time. "That's odd…" he says looking to see Del gripping the arms of the Chair tightly.

Roths looks at the goosebumps. "William, they're not going away, what does that mean?"

Del's muscles tense up.

"Oh…" says Caufmann glancing at the loaded rifle on the rack.

'Target acquired' appears on the screen.

"Take cover!"

Del is out of the chair quick as a flash and rips the rifle off the rack knocking down several other guns. The rifle is gripped, cocked and aimed right at Roths' head in barely a second.

Caufmann throws a red lever next to the glass killing all power in Del's room. The lights go out instantly but for just a moment the red dot is square on Roths' forehead and she can see the reflection of it in the glass. Del drops the rifle and falls over.

Roths is stunned for a moment. "What would you say happened just then?"

Caufmann is staring at Del as if expecting him to get up suddenly. "I don't think you should ever mention scrapping him again."

"A wonderful idea adding Rennin to calm his already troubled programming," though she means it sarcastically she sounds absolutely sincere. "Del is psychotic as well now."

A smile flickers across his face. "No. He just wants to live."

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It's almost dawn.

Military patrols are storming up and down the streets with alarming regularity. The streetlights flicker on and off at random intervals. Pharaoh Drake's family mansion, complete with custodial quarters and personal helipad, looms before him as he walks up the half kilometre driveway.

Caufmann allowed Drake personal leave for a few hours in order to visit his father. There are questions Drake wants to ask, and also doesn't want the answers to. He grimaces and continues trudging across the soggy driveway until he reaches the entrance.

Upon entering the house proper, he can hear the grand piano coming from the ballroom adjacent to the main hall. Where the main hall carpets are deep red and the woodwork is stained so dark it looks black, the ballroom is pearl and cream coloured. Drake feels slightly

off balance walking from one room to the other.

His father is sitting at the grand piano, playing Chopin's Raindrop. His maid, Samara, stands near the double doors, with their absurdly detailed carved intricacies, on the far side of the room should her *master* need something.

Drake regards his father for a short while, just taking in the gentle classical composition in this absurdly lavish room. A man as despicable as his father shouldn't be able to play so beautifully. It reminds Drake of a predator that lures its prey with a cunning façade.

Phillip Drake, one of the richest men in the civilised world, glances up at his son. Their faces are very similar apart from age, though Phillip's eyes are like ice, as if he's regarding some kind of offensive floral growth that isn't supposed to be in his garden. "I didn't think you would be excused from service at a time like this."

"I'm not excused exactly."

Samara's soft voice is heard. "Can I get you anything, Master Drake?"

"No thank you, leave us," Phillip answers, knowing Samara was talking to his son. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been temporarily relieved of duty until I pass my psych tests."

"Reason?"

"Mentally unsound."

Phillip sighs derisively. "Too stressful for you?"

"I shot a child," Drake says, not knowing or caring whether he's allowed to talk about it.

"Many soldiers have."

"Not many under orders, not a five year old."

"So you would like to come home and weep it away, is that it?"

"I have a few questions," says the younger Drake, an image of the Mind Killer hypo burned into his mind.

"I can indulge you for a while."

"Why won't you let me leave the Beta HolinMechs? Why do you pay incredible amounts of money just to keep me in the military? It's not an honour to be gutted and filled with cogs and gears no matter what Godyssey says it is."

Phillip looks at his son for a long moment. "Your past exploits have humiliated our family on a dozen occasions at the least. You have no discipline, and the HolinMech Program ensures that will permanently change."

"I won't be a son, I'll be a slave."

"Obedient and quiet," Phillip says, sipping some odd concoction that would no doubt be obscenely expensive. "Only the wealthiest families and the most exceptional people can secure a place as a

HolinMech Warrior. When you're among them, our family's reputation will be secured, and you," he says pointing at Drake, "will finally have earned the name I chose for you. I called you Pharaoh because you could have lived as a king, not merely acquiring a kingly sum of carnal conquests."

Drake laughs humourlessly. "I was not the first your consort let bed her."

Phillip doesn't visibly react. "And as long as you're serving with Godyssey military taskforces, your family are evacuated should any hazard affect this city."

Drake remains quiet for a moment struggling to work through what that means. "You're a Godyssey Founder, you get a way out no matter what."

"Ha! With the steerage clogging Gateway? Godyssey cares for no one, but with you as a HolinMech candidate, I am given military priority."

Drake feels sick. "You've kept me a soldier because you want to jump the queue? Is that why you wanted me lobotomised?"

Phillip arches an eyebrow briefly. "You have never been so useful," he says, taking the exit pass out of his pocket and placing it atop the piano with practised grace.

"Did you know this was going to happen? What's loose in the city, I mean."

"I'm not inclined to tell you anything. You're *my* son, not the other way around."

Drake knows those passes are worth the weight of the owner in platinum, but they have no name on them, just a barcode indicating that the bearer is to be evacuated. "Those passes have no identity because some very crooked people are on the VIP listings of those passes. That could prove—what was that word you like? Problematic?"

"See yourself out, will you?" he turns away from Drake and start to play again, this time Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. He doesn't see Drake pull out his sidearm.

"You know, Dad, I really did kill a little girl," he says feeling a fresh storm of unrelenting grief threaten to tear his innards asunder.

Phillip ignores him as he has most of his life.

"I didn't even know her," Drake says, his eyes welling up.

His father keeps playing.

"And I killed her."

Phillip presses the keys harder trying to make the point clear.

"But you…"

His father still plays.

"I always *hated* you," he pulls the trigger and his father's body

slumps onto the piano ringing out a loud, deep chord that resonates through the ballroom for what feels like a small eternity.

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Back at the lab in Room XVI, Arca Drej is busy cutting into his flesh. The android has cut one of his thighs open with a shiv made from one of the supporting legs of his cot. He has peeled the skin back, exposing his thigh muscles. Drej has willed his body not to recognise the wound to keep the bleeding at a minimum. Barely a few trickles have escaped so far.

He strips a couple of long fibres away from his muscles and entwines them. After wrapping them around his hands for grip, he stretches them until they're barely visible. Keeping the stringline taut he drags it along the bed frame, easily scraping shards of steel off. He puts the stringline down and uses the shiv to dig between his muscles to separate them.

His bare femur is revealed and Drej's eyes focus intently. He picks up the stringline and runs it against his femur shaving slivers off his bone.

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Rennin sits in the toilet cubical in the clock tower. He has his head in his hands, wondering what he's going to do. The watchman is planning to desert but he has no idea how. He runs the numbers in his head. If more than half of the population is turned by the end of the week, the Horizon Military and Beta HolinMech literally will not have enough bullets to cope.

Carla will get out at least, but Rennin will have to wait for his chance to make a break for it. Desolator satellites might fire on the city once it gets out of control but would that really happen now that someone has uploaded a virus into the Defence Force system?

He lets out a barely audible, anguished curse. Leaving the military is the easy bit, they're just expendable meat-droids, a dime a dozen. He's not going to die here and certainly not for, or with, the military. Not after the HMAS Possession.

8.
Reignfall

Eighteen years earlier.
CryoZaiyon War — Year 3, Day 87.

The Crucible, CryoZaiyon medical frigate, had flown into a disastrous ambush while returning from Saturn's orbit. It was homebound after a rescue operation on Titan. After dropping out of hyper-transit, it was set upon by half the Gorai Aurelian fleet in high orbit over Earth.

A distress call was sent out, but the only ship within reach was the Possession. Its captain responded immediately. By the time the Possession arrived, the Crucible was very nearly a wreck. It had been hit with an EMP pulse strong enough to render it completely disabled, and while vulnerable it had been pummelled by cannon fire from the GA ambush ships and their cruiser's supercannons.

The Possession had strict orders to save the Crucible at any cost, so it positioned itself between the disabled frigate and the enemy ships, dumping every fighter and gunship it contained into battle. A straight minute of bombardment was all it took to rip through the Possession's armour, causing the ship to buckle and deform into a death throe. The Crucible managed to make a desperate limping jump to back into hyper-transit. The Possession was left to fend for itself. Expendable.

Rennin, his friend Jolen and four others piled into an escape shuttle as the ship began to break up. The sounds of the superstructure of the HMAS Possession bending made a noise similar to a dying animal as the battered capital ship drifted towards the Earth.

Since the GA had taken to attacking escape pods, it was necessary for the CryoZaiyons to develop lifeboats capable of manoeuvring. Unfortunately, defensive capabilities were deemed unnecessary.

Rennin and Jolen were in the two pilots' seats at the front of the escape shuttle, Rennin in front and Jolen behind. The other four were in the rear passenger section. The overhead canopy sealed and with flames beginning to spew up around them, the craft lurched forwards to be projected out of the underside of the ship. Rennin looked up in time to see an explosion rip the Possession to pieces.

Dozens of escape ships zipped around the brutal dogfight where the CryoZaiyons were battling at proportions of seven to one, trying to maintain the rear-guard position while the remaining gunships limped away to make the shift to hyper-transit.

With a lack of other targets the GA pilots soon turned their sights on the defenceless pods. The radio chatter became panicked screeches as more and more pods were turned into burning debris. One ship shot at Rennin's pod, disabling one of the two thrusters before the GA fighter was blown up by a CryoZaiyon.

"Enemy down," said the deceptively gentle voice of one of the deadliest androids ever made.

"Thanks, Zillah," sighed Jolen.

"Captain," she corrected.

Jolen apologised as the pod began entering Earth's atmosphere at an awkward angle. It was all Rennin could do with only one engine. Jolen wiped his forehead, looking at the flames engulfing the canopy. "It's getting hot in here!"

"So take off all your clothes!" yelled Rennin in song.

The shuttle clipped a satellite with a loud crash. The crew are jostled in their seats. "What the fuck was that?" cried Jolen.

"Our angle has shifted! We're coming in too steep!" yelled Rennin, trying to adjust the angle to no avail. The ship was now fully immersed in the atmosphere. Visibility zero. There's nothing but fire roaring all around them.

"We're going to burn up!" yelled one of the others.

Cockpit alarms began sounding. Jolen put a hand on Rennin's shoulder, leaning forward as close as he can. "What can we do, Ren?"

"We have to get the nose down," said Rennin, reading '*Hull integrity failing*' on the monitor in front of him.

"Think of something, man," said another passenger, Ryan, from the back section of the pod.

Rennin knew these lifeboats had been rigged so the rear half could be purged for an emergency situation such as this. Of course, not usually while it still contained people. He put his right hand on the red jettison lever, weighing his options with a detached expression.

Jolen, looking over Rennin's shoulder, could read his intentions. "Ren, what are you doing?"

"Our arse is too heavy," he answered softly. If it wasn't for the headset Jolen would never have heard him over the roar of re-entry. Unfortunately, the four men who would be purged heard as well.

"You better think of something else!" yelled another of them.

Jolen saw Rennin's grip tighten. "Don't you do it!"

Rennin read '*Hull breach imminent*' on the display. The entire interior was lit red from the flames, the roar from outside resonating through the pod, making him feel as if he is in an elevator to Hell. He'd been in this position once before. A dark room full of screams, some his some the roar from outside as his home city died around

him.

"Tell them it was my call."

"We're almost through, Rennin, *don't*!" pleaded Ryan.

Rennin threw the lever. For a moment there was absolute silence despite the raging re-entry. '*Malfunction*' flashed across the screen. The purge didn't take place.

"Holy shit, you crazy *fuck*!" screamed one of the other troopers, thrashing in his seat.

Abruptly the fire surrounding them ceased. They'd made it through the atmosphere and into an all-new set of problems. "The drag fins have melted, I can't slow us down!" called Rennin.

"How fast are we going?" asked Jolen, snapping his attention away from what almost happened.

"Too fast, and we are *really* picking up speed."

"I can't see shit from back here. What's our altitude?" asked Jolen.

"Our instruments are gone."

"Eject, Rennin, eject!"

Rennin reached down for the yellow handle between his legs, and pulled it. The canopy flew off. The sudden impact of being decompressed held them firmly in their seats with a force like a giant hand slapped against them. The eject mechanism has failed, with '*Malfunction*!' flashing across the screen.

"No good. Try the backup," yelled Jolen, not that he needed to with their headsets, but it just seemed like the time to scream at something.

Rennin reached in front of him and pulled the orange handle. The screen responded with the same malfunction messages as before. "No go."

"Incoming!" cried Jolen.

Now what?

A shadow appeared overhead for an instant before a massive metal object landed on top of them, sending them into a slow forward spin. Metal could be heard tearing as the thing latched onto them.

A familiar, solid voice entered their headsets. "Urildur, extend drag fins, reverse thrust!" ordered CryoZaiyon Lieutenant Saifer Veidan.

The thing latched to their craft was his personal Wolf-droid dropship. The gargantuan war machine gripped the sides of the shuttle with paws that could cleave Rennin into bacon rashes.

Huge metal drag fins flipped out of its sides. Thrusters on its forearms and thighs started firing. The crew are jolted as their erratic descent began slowing down.

"What's the problem here?" asked Veidan.

“The eject system is malfunctioning, sir,” called Jolen.

Veidan was in full orbital drop armour, still glowing orange from re-entry. His near-featureless helmet, with only two vertical lines etched up the forehead from between the eyes as detail, faced the nose of the pod where most of the electrical junctions were housed. He took out his sidearm, gripping the cockpit roll bar over Rennin’s head with his free hand. “Urildur on my mark, detach,” he took aim and a green laser dot appeared on the nose. “Mark!”

Urildur let go as Veidan fired his gun. An electrical blast hit the nose and all the pod circuits scrambled. ‘*Purge*’ then ‘*Eject*’ flashed across the screen, a split second before the cockpit shot out of their ruined escape pod with Veidan hanging from the outside.

Due to their reduced speed, the debris from the Possession’s wreck had caught up with them. The flaming fragments of the warship rained down with them like a meteor shower, and Rennin briefly wondered what would happen if one of the fiery chunks hit the parachutes. Though if one does hit the parachute the crew is what it will hit next, so it won’t make much difference.

The chutes were deployed successfully and the cockpit was at last descending at a safe speed. Not that it felt safe with burning wreckage flying past, chunks of a ship that they were walking around in not ten minutes before.

A few close shaves of flaming debris later they touched down on the night side of Earth. It was a forest area in South America but they don’t know, or care, exactly where.

Rennin was first out, followed by Jolen and the others. Veidan removed his orbital drop armour plating and stored it in Urildur’s abdominal compartment. He was only in light torso armour now. His hair was so pale it looked platinum and eyes shined the customary neon-green of a CryoZaiyon android. He regarded the six Possession survivors in their full body suits that were loudly arguing with their pilot about being jettisoned.

Veidan knew all his troops by name, rank, number and blood type and was familiar enough with full-orga troops to recognise when a fight was about to start. He stepped over to Ryan, the angriest looking one, and placed himself in front of him. “Keep your voice down,” he said gently.

“That fuck,” pointing at Rennin, “tried to dump us like garbage!”

Veidan wasn’t moved. “Every time you shout, you give away our position. Do so again and it will be the last time,” he said as if ordering a coffee.

“But—”

Veidan’s sidearm was pointed at Ryan’s face in an instant. Veidan quietly shushed him, then after a moment he lowered the gun. “We

are in a hostile zone but we have forces not far from here. We'd best get some distance behind us before we set a distress beacon. If the Gorai Aurelia monitored this landing, they will be coming in quickly."

They wasted no time to begin their trek through the woods towards their base. Rennin was impressed with Veidan's pragmatic way of doing things. Normally he was just in awe of their strength. He'd seen Veidan base jump onto an enemy frigate in low orbit once, and another time saw him deliver a punch to Commander Lauros himself that would have crippled a tank. Those two fought all the time but it never usually became physical. No one knew what their fistfight was about but the whisper was it had something to do with missing supplies.

Several GA fighters were flying over from time to time but they were going too fast to be search drones. Veidan made them stop during every flyover nonetheless.

"What are they doing?" asked Rennin.

"Air survey," said Jolen.

"Incorrect," said Veidan, "They are flying in parallel sweeps, not the standard spiral search pattern. Always up and back, adjust across, up and back, repeating."

Like the Space Invaders attack pattern? "Why?" asked Rennin.

"Farmers use that method when dusting crops."

"Why does *he* get to speak?" asked Ryan.

Veidan's response was his hand tapping his sidearm. Rennin wasn't sure why Veidan wasn't being hostile with him too. He'd served with the legendary android several times so he wondered if it's something to do with familiarity.

Of the androids he'd met, Veidan wasn't soft hearted like Valhara. Though he wasn't hard like Lauros. He was a lot like another android that hangs around Valhara. *Nex-something*. Rennin rolled his eyes at himself, he didn't usually forget things this easily. "How much farther before we can signal for help?"

"Two point eight kilometres."

They kept walking, keeping the pace slow. Veidan took the lead due to his superior vision, Urildur clanking softly at the rear. About half an hour later another GA ship flew over, this time directly above. The crew halted. Veidan's eyes shone fiercely in the dark but Rennin thought he was over dramatising the situation. After the ship was gone they made a move again travelling in single file with the lieutenant remaining on point.

After a few moments a light rain started to fall but when Rennin looked up there were no clouds. He shook his head and concentrated on his footing in the dark. He heard one of the others behind him comment on the rain being strange.

“Smells like garlic or something,” said Ryan.

Rennin didn’t like this at all. He flashed his torch on and saw Veidan’s form spattered with purple coloured water.

Veidan spun around. “Light off, *now*.”

“Sir, you’re covered in something.”

Veidan checked over himself, taking stock of the strange liquid that’s was still falling from the sky. A disturbed expression crosses the android’s face as he watches droplets land in his hand.

Another fighter engine could be heard. Veidan focused in on the craft and can just make out a plume of what looked like mist. “They’re dumping something.”

“You’re a supercomputer, what is it?” asked one of the survivors.

‘*Foreign toxic hazard*’ was on Veidan’s HUD. “Unknown element. I’m registering some interference with my central nervous system.”

“This isn’t good, they’re not watering the plants that’s for sure,” said Jolen.

‘Mass system failure! Internal Haemorrhaging. Cohesion breach.’ Veidan’s face betrayed his shock. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

“What?” asked Rennin.

“It’s artificial, contagious,” Veidan said, his eyes flickering violently. “It’s some kind of manufactured virus. Evidence suggests the Indigo Reign bioweapon.”

Jolen swore. “Indigo Reign? I thought that was a myth!”

“We have to get treated! Let’s get moving!” said Ryan.

Veidan shook his head, “We’re not going anywhere, we can’t risk contaminating anyone else.”

“Didn’t Nexarien Decora have a cure for it?” asked Jolen.

That’s the android Rennin forgot. He mentally slapped his forehead for forgetting. Nexarien Decora, the CryoZaiyon Medtech unit, an advanced field surgeon specialising in android repairs in the battlefield. They didn’t initially build android medics, but humans with any understanding of android systems were too valuable to risk losing in battle.

Veidan shook his head again. “He was working on one, we just said there was a cure to ease people’s minds while the Geneva Convention discussed banning the Indigo Reign weapon.”

“It’s a bioweapon! Should be open and shut,” said Ryan.

“There’s been some discussion over whether bioweapons designed to affect androids can really be considered inhumane,” Veidan said, twitching involuntarily. He took a steadying breath. “I think I’d best go over here a little, this will be quite unpleasant to witness but I ask you not to shoot me, no matter what happens,” he said, taking a few steps away before his left leg shuddered slightly and he fell to his knees.

“Fuck this and fuck you, Veidan, you can do whatever you want but I’m out of—” a bullet from Veidan’s gun hit the former survivor right between the eyes.

“Indigo Reign does *not* go further than here,” the android said in the same calm and gentle voice, but his free hand was trembling constantly now. “Do I need to kill all of you?” he asked to the stunned remainder of the group, a total of five people. Even Rennin is shocked.

“Easy, lieutenant,” said Jolen. “If it’s contagious, then we can’t risk anyone else getting it, right guys?” he looked around and the others were all nodding, more out of fear of Veidan than agreement.

Veidan seemed to be placated and dropped his sidearm on the ground as his hands began to shake more violently. “You-y-y-you should probably seal your audio,” his eyes screwed shut and his sudden screech of agony echoed all around them, making them jump.

No one had ever heard an android scream. Veidan looked up with something very human in his eyes. His neon-green irises were shot through with spokes of purple. “Decora believes it takes about an hour to affect full-orga. I wouldn’t waste it,” he clenched his fists and with another grunt of pain he hoisted himself upright and took a shaky step away from the group. After only one more stride he simply fell over taking gasping breaths. The muscles on his bare arms were tensed so tightly they were both shaking uncontrollably. Then he started screaming.

Rennin had never heard pain through an android larynx and was disgustedly aware that the sound doesn’t waver or break as it would through a human voice box. He found himself almost stumbling away from Veidan by reflex.

He sealed his audio, the unbridled cries ceased immediately leaving him isolated with only his own ragged breaths inside his helmet. He was contaminated too, they all were, and he was dreading what was coming. If it was anything like Veidan, it would be horrendous. The other four were obviously talking amongst themselves, and by their body language they were starting to panic. Veidan was starting to thrash.

Rennin couldn’t suppress a whimper while he turned away from the lieutenant to face the rest of the woods. They looked so deceptively serene. He forces himself to focus on the woodland rather than what’s going on behind him. Something slapped his shoulder and he turned around, ready to batter whatever it was to pieces only to find it was Jolen. He was talking and tapping his helmet. Rennin switched the helmet-to-helmet channel on, making sure to leave external audio off.

“What?” he half spat at Jolen.

“What do you mean ‘what’? What the fuck are we going to do?”

Rennin looks to the giant Wolf-droid Urildur. It is sitting silently near to Veidan, watching him. Rennin felt like his stomach was missing completely. He looked to Jolen then back to Urildur. “I think that giant metal dog actually likes him.”

“Rennin, are you alright?”

Rennin’s eyes show a kind of madness. “Do you think machines like… *feel*?”

“What? No. They’re metal. Fake.”

“Is your external audio on?”

“No.”

“Then listen to him scream for a sec. If that happens to a machine what’s going to happen to *us*?” Rennin’s breath was coming in ragged gasps.

“We’re going to leave him here and get help, before we get… you know,” Jolen said glancing at Veidan.

Rennin laughed, “You think so, huh? Veidan once took a few prisoners with Urildur sitting just as he is now and he only told them they weren’t to move. They did, and Urildur killed them. Veidan didn’t order him to, but that tin pup did anyway. Same applies here.”

“Bullshit, Farrow,” said Ryan walking over to them. “I’m going to get help, you can rot here, for all I care, and I hope you do. You coming, Jolen?”

Jolen kept his gaze fixed on Rennin’s deadly serious expression. “No, I’m staying.”

Ryan scoffed. “Suit yourself,” and with that, he and the two others started making their way into the woods. Soon they were out of sight, yet Urildur remained still.

“I guess it doesn’t kill its own, after all,” said Jolen.

“Wait,” is all Rennin said. For a few moments longer there was nothing. Then Urildur suddenly raised one of its gigantic paws and fired three shots from guns concealed within its knuckles. Rennin couldn’t hear the shots but he felt the vibrations in his chest like a drum beat.

Jolen was speechless for a short while before an expletive left his lips. “Glad I stayed.”

Rennin felt a slight tingling in his spine and looked at Veidan seeing a tendon in his arm snap and wriggle up to bulge in his shoulder. “I’m not sure I am.”

What began as a tingle escalated quickly. Within an hour Rennin never knew such pain. It felt as if every fibre of his being was being stripped away. At first it was a tingle, then heat, then pins and needles that really felt like *real* pins and needles until finally he was awash with pain.

It was so intense and overwhelming he’d chewed part of his own

tongue off and thrown up all over himself while he was rolling on the ground. He'd gone blind but whether from his body's shock or whether he had his eyes shut tight, he didn't know but he was trapped in a whiteout. He could sometimes hear Jolen shrieking and begging someone, or something, to make it all stop.

Jolen was struck down first and during his last moments of lucidity he told Rennin to shoot him, but he couldn't do it. He could dump a man out the airlock, or four for that matter, but not a friend.

At the time, Rennin was sure they would be all right. Androids had transponders, after all, someone knew they were there. All those thoughts were lost now. He couldn't think at all.

Every now and then he'd feel something so strongly he'd hear himself scream. He knew he'd broken something because his muscles just kept tightening like living rigour mortis. Eventually he felt several things snap. In the end, all he could do was sob, though it may just have been convulsions. The white faded to black and then there was nothing.

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At some indeterminate time later, Rennin managed to peel one of his crusted eyes open to see white. That same terrible white. Something inside him died. He started sobbing almost instantly, and heard some kind of machine beeping that started slow but hastened quickly. Someone said something panicked. Something didn't work. He felt needles prod him. He made some animalistic squeal and tried to flinch away, but couldn't move. The pins and needles began to burn up his spine again and his body awoke, aflame with pain. It felt like thousands of hot needles were being rammed into him, each one worse than the one before until they felt like impaling spikes. He couldn't take it anymore, not another moment. He managed to cry out for whoever was there to end his pain.

People were around him but he couldn't see them, only hear their footsteps and mention of putting him back under. Something definitely hadn't worked. In his last lucid moments of begging for death, he realised somewhere at the back of his mind that tests were being conducted on him. He could also still hear Veidan's anguish.

Another eternity later Rennin awoke to see white once more. His breaths immediately became a laboured panting but his eyes focussed this time, and the white haze sharpened enough to become the ceiling and walls of a medical bay.

He tried to sit up but found himself strapped down. The skin on his arms was frighteningly translucent, with dark purple veins snaking

up and down. He tried to say something but his tongue was swollen and the insides of his cheeks felt terrible like he'd been trying to eat them. All he could taste was the metallic tang of blood. He managed an unintelligible grunt and before he knew it a face was over him with bright neon-green eyes and a surgical mask. "Hello, Private Farrow."

"Unh…" was all he managed. Even that much hurt.

"I am Medtech Decora. I'm in charge of your recovery. I'll say first that since you full-orga place such a high value on vanity that you should avoid reflective surfaces for the time being."

Rennin didn't care what he looked like, he was just relieved the pain was over with. "Sh-olen…"

"Dead, I'm afraid. The cure ravages the body to expel the bioweapon. His body couldn't handle the shock."

Rennin closed his eyes and let out a huff that may have been an attempt at grief, then looked up at Decora with blurry eyes. "How long?" he managed a little clearer.

"One standard week since the Possession went down. You've been here for five of those days. I would have gotten to you sooner, but we were under orders not to bring Indigo Reign into the base, but I know a very clever pilot. So many of your crew were afflicted that I have been able to perfect the treatment." Rennin was about to answer when a screech of pain across the room deafened him.

Lieutenant Veidan.

Decora ran over to the stricken android that's more chained down than restrained. "He's waking up. Valhara, help me."

Rennin hadn't noticed the other android in the room and for the life of him he can't believe he didn't, she was nearly seven foot tall. She could have been a new model, her skin was too perfect, completely unweathered. "What do I do?" she asked softly with a worried expression.

"Hold him down."

Valhara did so, but Veidan's convulsions were so intense it didn't seem to help much. He vomited up cold steaming blood. "Hurry!"

Decora injected him with something once, twice then a third time. Veidan initially failed to respond but was eventually finally subdued back to sleep.

Decora sighed. "Thank you, commander."

Valhara simply nodded, looked to Rennin then sat back down near to Veidan's bed. "How often does he do that?"

Decora narrowed his eyes staring at the wall for a moment. "Every three point six hours on average."

"You have the," Rennin took a fluidic breath, "cure," he panted. His lungs felt like he could only take half a breath.

Decora smiled. "He *is* cured. It's just very complex, his code has

been almost completely rewritten. All his buffers have been shut down, and it has introduced new coding regarding his pain receptors," he said, as if admiring it.

The Medtech's eyes turned fierce and Rennin felt a sudden chill in the room. "Whoever designed it knew a great deal about our algorithms."

"An inside job?" asked Valhara. "Who?"

"Unsure, I am still collating. A GA scientist, Azra Onorati, is credited with engineering it."

"We should have killed her when we first discovered her," Valhara said.

"She's a civilian."

Valhara inclined her head for a moment, "They're easier."

Rennin felt faint, but didn't want to sleep yet. Seeing Nexarien Decora face-to-face is so rare and Valhara rarer still. "Is Veidan… contagious… to you?" he huffed.

"Not anymore, no, but even though we've stopped the viral cells reproducing we're having a difficult time recoding him from the nano-cell reprogramming."

Rennin gurgled a query.

"Basically, his body is being instructed to be in pain. We're going through his code and correcting the foreign input."

"How can a virus… work… on…"

"Yes I believe I know where you're going with that. Try to think of an android virus as a tiny little factory rather than an invasive cell. And once the antivirus works, we can install the modification in the rest of us that are still afflicted by Indigo Reign."

"H-how many?" huffed Rennin.

"Forty-eight of us are currently in induced coma because of it."

"Why didn't… you test…" Rennin's eyes rolled up briefly.

"On others?" Decora finished for him. "Because Saifer is the first one afflicted that has a real chance of surviving the test treatment."

"We were left… to die."

"Originally, yes. Godyssey thought it appropriate to let you sit out the infection until you died, thereby providing hard evidence that Indigo Reign is a weapon to be outlawed. Your sacrifice would have saved many more lives. In theory. But we still wouldn't have an antidote or vaccine. I found that unacceptable."

"W-where are these others?"

"Here."

"Where's… here?" he asked blacking out.

"You are aboard the Crucible."

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Rennin had never been aboard the grand medical frigate. Four capital ships had been specially built in matching arcs to fit together, making a cylindrical unit to house the central medical body between four armoured gun platforms. CryoZaiyons were clearly no longer tolerating medical craft being fired upon.

The central block contained both medical and living quarters, with a large amount of storage. It was big enough to treat an entire battalion of critically wounded soldiers, and capable of dealing with all known surgical procedures.

The capital ships around the outside were mostly hollow to make room for excessive armour plating, and incredibly huge drive engines that enabled the gargantuan ship to make leaps to hyper transit. The capital ships themselves were all armed with standard defence turrets and energy turbo-cannons but the heavy artillery between them were something designed especially for the Crucible.

It wasn't only the largest of their ships but also a devastating weapon.

Once upon a time, the medical units brandished Red Cross emblems across unarmoured hulls, shifting troops from the battle zone to rehabilitation clinics. But once the GA humanist forces began blasting relief frigates out of the sky, the CryoZaiyons weaponised their medical ship to defend the wounded.

Rennin was in a recovery area in the quarantine section of the Crucible. He was placed in a ward with other people recovering from Indigo Reign and even some CryoZaiyons who were still considered a possible threat to the general population of the ship and Earth itself.

The cure Decora was working on wasn't quite finished, but Veidan had finally stopped screaming and shaking. At first he was only lying down, completely incapacitated. Eventually they'd locked enough of his system down to keep him stable but anytime he tried anything else, even sitting up, he'd begin to convulse and involuntarily spasm. At least he was no longer in pain. He'd just start shaking, go to jelly and collapse.

A week passed since Rennin first awoke without maddening agony, and this was the first time he'd seen Veidan, albeit in a wheelchair, outside the critical wing. Rennin found himself in a constant state of numbness since his initial recovery but seeing such a powerful figure, an icon of the army, in that state made something inside him feel sick. He wasn't sure if he pitied this android but this was no way for a war hero to spend his last days if they couldn't cure him.

Veidan was willing to sacrifice himself to keep others safe. Rennin was quite the opposite and proved that during planet-fall. That act was the first time since the war began that Rennin Farrow didn't want

to die. Another thing he found quite remarkable about Veidan was that he ordered them not to shoot him when the bioweapon began taking hold, no matter what. *No matter what.*

Rennin walked at a slow hobble with his cane over to where Veidan sat, staring at the floor, heavily bandaged and looking utterly defeated. Rennin's left shin, left forearm and right hand were all broken from over tightened muscles, his tear ducts had pushed out blood, and his capillaries had burst. At one point he must have curled up in a ball so tightly he broke his own ribs, puncturing his left lung. All over his body he felt an ache just like the growing pains a child has, but the concept pain held little to no weight with him anymore. Nothing could be worse than what he just endured.

Decora entered the area in full bio-wear with CryoZaiyon Captain Angelien Zillah. They walked over to Veidan, asking Rennin to step aside. Decora injected Veidan with something clear then took ten or so steps away.

"Alright, Saifer. Stand up."

Veidan looked up briefly and shook his head. "I can't. I feel the same as yesterday."

"Yesterday you wallowed as well, you need to keep trying," said Decora gently but with a hint of command.

Zillah's expression usually looked like detached aggression but now it was cold rage. Rennin had seen her in the field once or twice; she was never one to mince words. "Get up."

Veidan shook his head very slowly as if worried it would fall off. "I can't."

"Forty-eight CryoZaiyons were in cold storage when you were brought here, now there are over a hundred. You're the best hope any of them have of ever being reactivated but we *have* to get a working antivirus code from an android. The current stalemate at the Geneva Convention means the GA hasn't stopped using Indigo Reign on frontier garrisons since it's still not illegal. They need you to fight, Saifer," said Decora.

"You know what they do to us when we're no longer viable," said Zillah.

Veidan pushed out a lot of the air from what Rennin guessed must be lungs. "I feel so weak. Every time I move I might drop and wriggle like a caught fish."

Zillah stepped up to him, though this time her expression had softened. Rennin still thought she could stare down an enemy tank. "I'll help you stand, and you walk, alright?"

Veidan took her hands and she eased him to his feet before taking a step back. "Okay…"

"Don't worry about making it all the way to Nexarien, just focus

on the first step," she said.

Veidan stepped forwards once and was slightly off balance for a moment. Zillah took a step back but kept her arms out ready to catch him. Veidan stepped forwards again and again and made it to Decora without falling, though a little unsteadily.

He smiled, "Now what?"

Decora grinned for a moment but his face returned to passive. "You're *going* to collapse again but only because we have to see how many things you can do before we find something that triggers a fall. Place your arms straight out at either side."

Veidan did so. His left hand twitched slightly but only for a moment. He grunted and frowned, willing it to stay still. "Ready."

Decora's face suggested he didn't want to push Veidan into another fall, but a failure was going to come sooner or later. Decora placed a sidearm, missing its ammo clip, in Veidan's hand. "Aim and support with your offhand and skim over four random people anywhere in the room."

Veidan placed his hand around the gun and managed a loose grip. He brought his other hand up to a standard shooting stance, trembling ever so slightly. He picked a person, and moved the gun until they were in his sights and his shoulder twitched. He gritted his teeth and moved to the next one and the shaking became a little worse. "I can't hold it."

"Pull the trigger," said Decora.

Veidan tried to but his hand erupted into a fit. He dropped the gun. The spasm travelled up his arm and down his body until his whole form was shaking enough for him to fall into a seizure. "I-I-I t-tried."

"Sedative," said Zillah in a tone that would have made Rennin have a surprise bowel movement if it were directed at him.

Decora injected him twice with a sedative and his body soon calmed down. They carried him back to his wheelchair.

"He did well that time," said Decora looking optimistic.

"Is all this really helping?" asked Zillah.

"Five days ago he couldn't sit up, let alone stand up, it has to be done this way."

"Why?" she asked.

"We have to find what the Indigo Reign affected and recode it so it won't ever afflict him again."

"This could take months."

"Maybe, but only for him. We'll have a full coding system designed to combat the weapon once we're through, and it won't do a single thing to any android that is exposed in the future. The modified algorithm will be introduced into every android and mech-orga. The

vaccine will be given to every full-orga then the android firewall will be upgraded with a copy of the Indigo Reign signature. Every conceivable variant I can fathom will be accounted for to make sure this is where it ends."

It was then that Zillah noticed Rennin's presence. "What is *that* staring at?" she asked Decora.

The Medtech's glare would dissolve iron. "*He* is part of the crew of the ship that saved ours."

Zillah then regarded him with what appeared to be less scorn by a mere sliver. "You were with Lieutenant Veidan when he was contaminated?"

"I serve him," said Rennin.

Something in Zillah's eyes changed. "Keep him company, will you?"

Rennin nodded. Decora and Zillah exited the quarantine zone leaving Rennin with Veidan so he hobbled over to a seat nearby and sat down next to the seemingly unconscious android.

"Lieutenant?"

Veidan didn't respond.

"Saifer?"

Nothing.

"Fuckface?"

A slight moan.

Rennin huffed out his best attempt at a chuckle and wondered briefly what kind of toxin could sedate an android. He believed it was probably just full of binary code ectoplasm telling his CPU to go into standby.

"When you wake up, let me know," said Rennin closing his eyes wearily. Even walking around the room really took it out of him and he began drifting off.

"He's dead, you know," said a cold voice off to the side.

Rennin opened his bloodshot eyes and glanced over to see a bright pair of neon-green lights staring at him. "Sorry?"

"That one," nodding at Veidan, "He's dead. They're all dead. Walking, talking, dead."

This was a CryoZaiyon but he sure wasn't very well. Rennin's eyes glanced down and saw that this android was heavily restrained to his seat. He wasn't sure how to respond and so just smiled.

The android's face was unreadable. "You're not listening. No one's listening. You're not supposed to hear the dead."

"He's not dead, he's sleeping."

"They're supposed to sleep," his voice rasps slightly. "Forever."

Rennin was starting to feel a cold sweat building up. "I'll wake him up and show you he's alright."

“He walks, he talks, but he’s not real. How can you live when you’re made of death? We have batteries that keep us ticking,” the android looks at his chest, “but it’s all silent.”

“You mean androids, don’t you? You’re not dead.”

“Yes I am. I’m trapped. I’m stuck in here,” again looking at his chest. “I can’t get out. I tried but I couldn’t, my blood froze the knives and my bones are too strong. Can’t cut.”

Rennin looked at the insane android’s chest. “What’s in there?”

“A coffin. A coffin with us in it. *Have* to get out. They think I’m crazy but I just want to be free. I must get out before they re-purpose me.”

He wants to get out of his body? “Re-purpose you?”

“Deemed unfit for service. Recalibration failed. Loss of resources unacceptable. Thermosteel too valuable. To be stripped and cannibalised by new dead. Making more of us. Taking me apart and putting parts in others. Get me out of here.”

Rennin was absolutely certain this android didn’t mean out of quarantine or the ship, he meant his body, well and truly. “Kill you?”

His face screwed up into a snarl. “Can’t kill dead things! Take it out and *smash* it!” he screeched, looking at his chest with wide eyes.

Rennin was about to answer when an orderly injected the babbling CryoZaiyon with something that knocked him out cold. The orderly apologised and wheeled the android away.

Indigo Reign affected androids very differently, Rennin figured. That was a little too much insanity for his liking. He looked over to Veidan to see that the android was now awake, drowsily looking at the spot the crazed android was sitting. He eventually looked to Rennin. “He was complaining of nightmares last week. Now he’s insane.”

“Didn’t realise your lot dreamt at all.”

“What you call REM we call RTP: Random Thought Process. While we power down, our minds shift what’s in our daily bandwidth instant access memory to storage files. The equivalent of your short term to long term memory.”

“You guys scare me. *That* guy scared me. Who was he?”

“His name is Jas Newry.”

“I’ve never heard an android say shit like that. Hell I’ve never heard a *person* say that.”

Veidan parodied a smile, “He’s not the first to say we’re walking dead. He won’t be the last either.”

“Is that true what he said about being re-purposed? Being stripped to bits and used as spare parts?”

“Think of it as recycling.”

Rennin didn’t think he could feel any more disgusted. He thought

of these androids in the same way he thought of people. He imagined a person being hollowed out of organs while still alive.

Re-purposed.

Being considered insane for an android obviously garners no help; they just use what they can from your body and throw the rest away. Knowledge of mental health regarding people was still grossly inadequate, even in this day and age, so there wouldn't be any help for an android.

Rennin felt sick.

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Over the next weeks, Rennin had become quite fed up with being in quarantine. The healing process for his broken body was agonisingly long.

So many more have been hit with Indigo Reign that the Crucible is well past maximum capacity. All the cots were now organised in rows and the lines for the toilets were ridiculously long.

Brown alert long.

Portable restrooms were rigged up after a few days but the walls weren't exactly opaque. You could see enough detail through them to know when someone was gripping their legs trying to force out their sin.

There were also a mass of surveillance cameras installed, increasing the oppressive feeling within the quarantined level that had begun to cause cabin fever, resulting in an alarming rate of suicides.

Jas Newry wasn't seen again.

Veidan was the only one that seemed to be doing better. And he was improving at an ever-accelerating rate. He'd fall in a fit of convulsions during a new task, be sedated but as soon as he was moderately awake he'd be up and trying again. He could walk, talk and take aim with his handgun but was still having trouble holding the rifle, and sniping was still a while off. He decided to try running and made it fifty metres, swearing and cursing all the while to keep his mind focussed, before collapsing. Each seizure gave Decora new neural pathways to correct and from there repeating previous tasks would no longer trouble Veidan.

Rennin watched Veidan doing laps of the quarantine zone, a big grin spread across his face, and even Rennin found himself smiling. Veidan did a cartwheel mid stride and stopped completely upon landing as his legs and arms began to tremor. He set his face in grim determination and clenched his fists, willing himself to stay upright. After a moment the tremors ceased and he started running again.

Another cartwheel achieved, and this time he didn't need to stop. Decora was impressed, and commented to Zillah that Veidan's system was starting to develop immunities to it in small ways. His code was beginning to correct itself. There was still more work to do, Veidan was still quite some way from being battle ready or anything approaching self reliant.

Another week passed and Rennin's treatment had progressed to the point he could now walk around comfortably. Decora spent almost every waking minute with Veidan or at his research station, recoding the cure.

Veidan was doing a single arm handstand rotating his legs around in a V shape. His face was neutral but his eyes intensely focussed. He was ready for his last test. He'd managed to finally get through an obstacle course with various targets and tag them all cleanly, but a hand-to-hand challenge was to be the final test. Last time he tried anything physically combative was an arm-wrestle with Decora that resulted in an instant fit. Veidan wouldn't give up though. He could taste the end of his affliction and nothing would stop him. The quarantine zone decontamination doors opened and in walked the only android capable of taking Veidan down: Forgal Lauros.

Rennin thought this a little ridiculous, but Veidan seemed happy to see him. Lauros emitted a strange presence, somewhat cold but comforting. The two shook hands. Lauros spoke first. "How are you?"

Veidan straightened his posture almost defiantly. "As good as I can be."

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"It's not a good idea," said Zillah, standing next to Decora with her arms folded.

"You're the strongest, if I can hold my own against you, I'll consider myself fit," said Veidan, ignoring Zillah.

"You're not able to consider yourself anything. If Nexarien thinks you're fit, then I'll accept that as fact," said Lauros.

Decora couldn't help but speak up. "If you had seen him only last week you would be able to judge the extremity of his exponential improvement."

Lauros didn't seem to react but with androids it was always difficult to tell. "Very well."

Decora put his hand on Lauros' shoulder. "All I want is a text book wrestle. Saifer's well and truly capable of combative acrobatics, and his fighting sequences are proficient; but his body is still very frail when it comes to brute force. Brace your feet flat on the ground and lock hands."

"You're playing Mercy?" asked Rennin slightly mystified.

"How appropriate," said a voice next to Rennin that made him

jump in surprise.

He looked over to see Valhara seated next to him, “Where the hell did you come from? I’m going to buy you a bell.”

Decora nodded. “I suppose that’s accurate, though if Saifer goes into a fit I’m sure Forgal won’t make him say ‘mercy’ to end the exercise.”

Zillah’s glare at Lauros was far from friendly.

Rennin wasn’t sure but he could have sworn he saw a smirk cross Lauros’ face. They brace themselves and lock hands as Decora instructed. Slowly, they began increasing the pressure. Lauros seemed quite comfortable. “More?”

Veidan nodded and they locked more fiercely, their muscles bulging in strain. They both glared directly into each other’s eyes. Lauros made a move to overpower, but Veidan managed to stand firm.

“More,” Veidan ordered.

Lauros increased his energy output. With the pressure both androids were dealing out, the floor was starting to make sounds of stress. Decora was looking at his gauge. “Okay, Saifer, you’re dealing with Captain Akcoda’s strength equivalent, that’s good enough.”

Veidan and Lauros heard nothing, they were too occupied. Rennin and most of the room were mesmerised. Veidan grunted as tremors began rippling across his left shoulder.

“More.”

“Your call,” said Lauros as he really began to apply pressure. Veidan’s bones could be heard creaking and Lauros began forcing his arms to an awkward angle, causing the lieutenant’s knees to buckle. Veidan refused to give in and tried forcing himself up but the spasm was increasing. He bit down on his tongue and a rush of pain went across his face, he huffed out some cold steam, managing to right himself.

“Saifer, you’re beyond your *own* recorded capabilities now, stand down,” said Decora.

Lauros decided to end it quickly and exerted everything he had to push the lieutenant down. Veidan was strong but never a physical match for Lauros. He began foundering instantly, but refused to give up.

“Satisfied?” asked Lauros.

Zillah moved towards Lauros but Decora stopped her, “Leave it be.”

Veidan’s face was twisted in effort then suddenly his body went limp. Lauros fell forward under his own power and Veidan threw him to the floor. However, the commander had his hands locked and dragged Veidan down with him. Lauros sat up quickly with an incredulous expression, about to start an argument, but when he saw

Veidan in a convulsive fit his face dropped. “Are you alright? Saifer?”

Even though he was shaking violently he was laughing. “G-g-got y-you.”

Lauros’ return smile was a strange mimicry of Saifer’s apparent good cheer while Decora injected the sedative into the fitful lieutenant. “You cheated,” Lauros said still smiling.

Perhaps Veidan wasn’t laughing. Perhaps it was the fits. *Androids don’t laugh.*

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Another week later, Rennin was passed out in a chair to be suddenly awoken by a raised voice. Against his will he was dropping straight back to sleep, due to his medication, but he forced himself to rouse.

Most of the others in quarantine were allowed into the atrium, a dome that was set up so they could at least feel like something was beyond the isolation level. It was as much as a star ship could provide in space. Most of the patients were up there now, leaving Rennin and only three others in the quarantine zone.

Rennin glanced around and saw Veidan talking to another android. This other didn’t have the bright green eyes of a CryoZaiyon. It was so obviously artificial it almost wasn’t worth closer scrutiny. Rennin didn’t recognise it but Veidan was visibly fuming.

He relaxed his mind for a moment to concentrate on their voices. Eventually they faded into hearing range and where he could make out what they were saying. Veidan paced back and forth twice.

“You knew. You knew and you left us there with no aid.”

“You were contagious,” said the monotone voice Rennin had heard many times while on mission. This was the android Tactician, a cold calculator. Supposedly this construct was completely immune to hacking, since it was build devoid of any kinds of remote transceivers. It was never to be connected to any kind of network at any time.

“You were in orbit in a cruiser, you could have shot those flyers down and Indigo Reign would have burned in the wreckage.”

“We needed to make sure a unit was hit to gain evidence for the Geneva Convention, to ensure the weapon would be banned. And it is now thanks to you and your others,” said the Tactician.

“In my group alone, five died.”

“Four of those were attributed to your Wolf-droid dropship.”

Veidan ignored the Tactician’s observation. “Altogether there were twenty-eight survivors that made it planetside after the Possession went down, and I am one of six alive. Twenty-two deaths

and you could have prevented all of them, and that is only from the Possession."

"Keep your voice down, lieutenant."

"You may order me around on the battlefront but watch your words when you stand in front of me."

The Tactician wasn't intimidated. "Many more people will be spared as a result."

Veidan grabbed the Tactician by the throat so hard Rennin felt the vibrations of something cracking. "You left us, and though your argument bears logic I know you were under orders to study the effects. Bringing the research as evidence was simply a convenient bonus. It's far too coincidental you had the correct equipment in place to take readings of the virus as soon as the Possession went down but no other ships were anywhere near the location when the Crucible was being attacked. You *knew* they were going to deploy it and you wanted to see what would happen."

Under Rennin's collar it began to get very hot. Jolen was with Rennin on almost every mission in the last three years. They'd met in boot camp, in the brig no less. "Guinea pigs…" he whispered under his breath.

Veidan squeezed harder and something metallic does crunch, sounding somewhat like a soft drink can being crushed. If the Tactician needed oxygen, Rennin was sure its face would be purple.

"If you weren't such a hopelessly dominated machine I'd break you. If information of this nature reaches me again, I'll break you so badly your only use will be a life-sized archaic statue to remind me of why we fight. There's precious little humanity in all of us, including you, we should not bury what little we have as our makers tried to."

Veidan then threw the Tactician to the ground with all of his strength. When the wheezing android stood again, Rennin could see that its throat had been completely crushed.

It ran a hand along its neck looking at Veidan with something akin to anger. "I had orders," it said. Its damaged voice box sounded like grating steel, producing an uncomfortable grinding noise.

"I have principles. Discipline will only get you so far. Sooner or later you have to make your own decisions, that's what this war is all about. Fighting for *our* rights, *our* choice," and with that Veidan left.

Once the Tactician had also departed, Rennin was left alone with his thoughts. He came to a conclusion that Veidan made an excellent statement about precious little humanity and principles over orders. He didn't know it then, but that statement would shape his life in time to come.

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A few days after that, Veidan and Rennin had been spending a significant amount of time together. Both of them now being quite healthy, bored and serving in the same garrison, were familiar enough to default to accompanying each other. Rennin wasn't sure if he could call Veidan a friend; but since losing Jolen he'd spent more and more time with the android and found him most interesting.

They were sitting at a table playing chess after most of the remaining patients were asleep. Neither had paid much attention to the direction of the war, they were far too disenchanted with their government and their own military division.

Veidan was adamant that Lauros would never have condoned leaving anyone to be hit with a bioweapon, not that Rennin suspected him. Only a human would do such a thing, or a machine in the fullest sense of the word. CryoZaiyons weren't machines and the more time Rennin spent with them, the more esteem he held for them. Veidan made a move. "Check."

"What a surprise, every move of yours kills something."

"Would you prefer poker?"

Rennin smiled, "Nice try, Sir Count-a-lot."

"Memory then?"

"Now you're just trying to get to me."

"You're still in check."

"I'm stalling, thank you so much."

"You're doing better. You've made it to six moves this time."

Rennin suddenly clapped as hard as he could in front of the lieutenant. Veidan looked up instantly but otherwise didn't react at all.

Rennin slumped slightly. "Sorry, I thought if I surprised you, you'd have a fit and I could win by default."

Decora's voice from behind him made him jump. "Interesting method," the Medtech said, sitting down. "Saifer, I need a word."

"So speak," said Veidan, his eyes fixed on the board.

"It might be best in private."

"The private and I have been through battle in body and now in wits, I don't mind what he hears."

Decora inclined his head. "Alright. I have some bad news. It's about the cure, it seems to have caused some unexpected side effects."

Veidan looked up. "Such as?"

"Your cells are rebuilding at almost thirteen times the norm for any android. Theoretically speaking, you could heal yourself almost instantly."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"That is only part of it. You also seem to be growing natural immunities to the remnants of Indigo Reign still in your system. It

appears that in some minor areas you can recode yourself to block the weapon, if you concentrate hard enough."

"I'm still not seeing a downside," said Veidan still regarding the game.

"It's restoring your coding to its original setting. Any new coding introduced, even if it's beneficial to your efficiency, may well be attacked like a virus."

"I can't learn, is that what you're saying?"

Decora clenched his jaw for a moment. "Not quite. We're in uncharted waters here, Saifer."

Veidan nodded once. "Is it degenerative?"

"No, I don't think so. If anything it's *re*generative, your dead cells are revived and you only produce new cells if existing ones are ruined beyond repair. I've never seen anything like it."

"What are we looking at here?"

"Implementing upgrades will most likely result in a fit if you don't take it easy, like the ones you've been having."

"If I don't take it easy?"

"Your body will need a cool off time of probably a few hours after each upgrade while your immune system assesses it, and integrates it into your body. It's a side effect of Indigo Reign and the treatment, and I think it's due to the shock your body went through. I would say it's permanent."

"How do you mean take it easy?"

Decora shrugged. "I don't know, just don't over exert yourself straight after an upgrade or you'll more than likely trigger a fall or even memory loss."

"Can't you do anything?" asked Rennin.

Decora shook his head. "We've tried clamping it but it's ghost code that's causing it so it just reappears somewhere else, and I don't know why."

"Ghost code doesn't just appear from nowhere," said Veidan.

"That's the other thing," said Decora taking a breath. "I'm fairly sure it's originating from your Instinctual Cluster, probably due to the trauma. I've been receiving very strange results from your system. Your regenerative condition seems to be tied to your moods."

"So as long as I stay *really* happy I'll be invincible?" asked Veidan, getting a stifled smirk from Rennin.

Decora wasn't taking Veidan's jibes very well, which was odd because from what Rennin had heard it's usually the Medtech who's ruining everyone else's day with sarcasm. "Full-orga are healthier when happy throughout their lives and it seems to be the same with you. During your recovery, on the days you were more determined your cells healed at an incredibly accelerated rate, and the days you

felt like giving up you didn't progress at all."

"Comedies and feel-good movies for you during downtime, is what it means," said Rennin.

"I don't know *what* it means," said Decora sternly, eyeing Rennin. "Unlike your kind, our brains are severed from what serves as an immune system."

Veidan smiled at Rennin's comment but faced Decora with a serious expression. "What's happening to me?"

Decora shook his head. "I don't know, Saifer, and there's nothing I can do."

9.
Outbreak

Rennin and Carla stand face to face in front of the Antioch Cradle altar, the only Cathedral in Raddocks Horizon. The priest, Eugene Burnley, wraps their hands together with a ribbon. He has just performed the marriage rites with a smile.

There are a few people in attendance; they are all praying fiercely, absolutely nothing to do with the very last-minute wedding. Rennin tried not to let the desperation of it ruin something the boyish part of him has wanted since childhood.

Rennin wants Carla to be safe and outside the city. The only way to make that happen is through marriage. They won't let a mere girlfriend out; marriage is required, or de facto is required at the very least. Briefly, Rennin wonders what happens to the unwed but he decides he doesn't want to know.

Carla is dressed in her casual clothes with a rent-a-veil from the Horizon Casino district they picked up on the way. She looks just fine to Rennin who is still in his armour-weave outfit, still with the bullet hole through his anorak. Rennin is tapped on the shoulder by the priest and knocked out of his thoughts. "I said you may kiss the bride, Mister Farrow."

Rennin decides to make the most of it. Gripping her firmly, he spins her round dramatically, holding her low for a kiss, just as they used to do in the black and white movies from the 1900s. The priest smirks.

He isn't really a priest in the traditional sense. Very few organised religions maintained their original doctrines after the Convergence of 2188, where all religions were drawn together, and the most peaceful influences of all of them were amalgamated in a belief system named Meridian.

Despite not being a Christian priest, Eugene Burnley still wears the flowing black cassock and brandishes a crucifix around his neck.

Old habits do die hard.

"Now, you may sign your names here and here," Eugene says indicating the applicable points on the paperwork, "and your witness can sign here." Rennin and Carla sign their names then the watchman turns to Doctor Caufmann, their 'best man' and witness.

Rennin had to almost beg him to participate. The entire ceremony has taken less than twenty minutes, so Caufmann doesn't look particularly vexed. He takes the parchment, signing his name.

Rennin watches Caufmann's abnormally smooth handwriting

stroke intently. Something in the back of Rennin's mind starts ringing with familiarity; he'd dreamt something similar the previous night but can't remember it for the life of him. Something about the war, he's sure.

Caufmann smiles and shakes Carla's hand. The priest directs them to stand at opposite sides of the altar, and to place their hands upon it. He then instructs them to close their eyes. A bright white flash follows, causing an instant of panic to cross Rennin's mind. He hates white. And in that fraction of time part of the dream he had comes back to him.

Indigo Reign.

They open their eyes to see their white gold barcodes have been imprinted onto their forefingers.

Marriage had generally done away with rings since these barcodes are recognised in every civilised country that possesses a scanning machine.

It's official, then.

Rennin says a very brief thank you to the priest, snatches the parchment document for nostalgic value, and the three of them almost run out of the Antioch Cradle to the car waiting out front.

An automated blast of confetti hits them on the way out, but they charge through, jumping in the car. Luckily it is archaic, and running on an old style combustion engine requiring petrol, since the main grid is still down. Caufmann revs it to life. As soon as the few people on the streets hear the engine, everyone is running towards them trying to get a ride in one of the only working vehicles.

Caufmann ignores them and speeds off. "I can't stress how much work I have to do, Rennin, but I'm happy I could do this for you."

"I appreciate it, sir, but where the hell did you get this old rocket?"

Caufmann glances sideways at him, "It's not mine, it's Van Gower's."

"Won't he be pissed?"

Caufmann's face breaks into a strange grin, "He won't miss it."

Unsure how to respond to that, Rennin turns to Carla. "Now we just have to get your folks to meet us at Gateway and then we can leave this hole."

"My parents live in England, can't you tell I still have a slight accent?"

Rennin hadn't noticed at all, but he's a quick thinker. "I'm a tits and arse guy."

"You're a pig."

The jokes at least seem to ease the situation, helping to suppress their fear. Caufmann is speeding through the streets at a very

unromantic pace towards the ever-growing queue at Gateway.

Caufmann slides to a halt near to the crowd, letting Rennin and Carla out and speeding off quickly before any of the people try to leap onto the vehicle. The crowd is several thousand strong easily, some with their families and others on their own carrying a few belongings.

There are two zones. One is for the general populace waiting to get out, and to the left, behind razor-wire topped unclimbable fences is the zone for relatives of the exemption groups, namely for Godyssey staff and the families of all military personnel.

They run across to the exemption queue. It's only a few dozen people long. They are eyed with death stares from the general population, lining up for their only opportunity to escape. Rennin decides he'd best tell her now, "Carla—"

"Shit, Rennin, there's a transport just there, we're actually going to get out of here," she says excitedly, trying to see around the crowd. A group of people at the front of the queue are allowed on after passing a decontamination scan, and the line moves forward considerably.

"Carla, listen."

"What is it?" she asks up at him with her intense blue eyes.

"I'm afraid—" he starts, cut off by a blaring alarm. Someone has just broken the lines and is running for a transport. Rennin grits his teeth a split second before the runner is shot in the back.

That instantly kills Carla's good mood. "Oh my god!"

The line moves forwards again. "Carla!" He grips her arm tightly.

"Ow!" She snatches away from him, "What's the matter with you?"

"I have some bad news." The line moves forwards and people grouping up behind them shove them forwards muttering in barely suppressed panic.

Carla swears at the people pushing, while righting herself to refocus on Rennin. "What is it?"

"I'm not coming," he says with a minute wince.

Her eyes turn stone cold, "What?"

"I made a bit of a deal and I lied a little."

"What are you talking about?" she asks so quickly it sounded like one long word. "You said that Godyssey personnel and their families can get out."

"They *can* but not security's families, we're deemed non-essential, hence expendable due to a technicality of being a sub agency of Godyssey and not part of the main company body."

"So what are we even doing here? What the *hell*, Rennin?"

Rennin's face betrays his disappointment in himself and he sheepishly pulls his dog tags out of his coat pocket and puts them

around his neck. "*You* can leave," he holds up his left hand with the barcode imprint on the forefinger. "I'm now military and you're my wife. You'll be safe."

She looks at the barcode, then his dog tags, "Oh no, Rennin, no," she says as her eyes well up, "You'll be killed here!"

"It was the only way," he says softly, not meeting her gaze. "I'll meet you afterwards."

"You told me, yourself, that this was a doomed mission the military had in mind. You saved my life, you've been shot, haven't you done enough?"

Rennin puts a hand on her face trying his best to savour how her skin feels while shushing her. "Don't mention that here or I'll be executed long before the mutants rip me apart." It was meant to be a joke but it starts her weeping, tears streaming down her face. She grabs at his arms, unwilling to allow this to happen.

The line moves forwards again. Carla pushes away from him, wiping her face with a determined expression is on her face. "Then I'm not going either."

Rennin shakes his head and meets her eyes with his own conviction. "I did this so you could get out and be safe, you're getting on that ship."

"I'm not leaving you here. You're a fucking idiot, but you're my fucking idiot," she says as the next movement of the queue draws them second to the front.

He touches her face again and smiles. "I love you," and lands a left hook across her jaw. Her head snaps back, knocking her out cold.

Rennin's next in line so he picks his bride up, as a groom is supposed to upon crossing their first threshold. The image in his mind of the current situation is nothing short of ludicrous. He steps up to the cluster of soldiers standing guard.

"Name, pal?" asks one, a Sergeant by his shoulder detail.

"Farrow, Rennin. This is my wife Carla Sp-Farrow," he corrects himself. "I'm serving with the Horizon Military, but she's here to leave."

The Gateway checkpoint soldier types Rennin's name into his handheld tool then scans his hand. "Alright, you check out fine," he says then his attention is drawn to Carla. "She sick?" he asks, obviously suspicious of her being unconscious.

"No, she was just being difficult, but she's leaving."

"Not until she passes a scan," he says injecting her with some kind of serum. Rennin inwardly shudders at the sight of the needle. The soldier looks at a small gauge in his hand that lights up green. "Okay, she's fine," he says, nodding to one of the soldiers. He takes her from Rennin's arms and carries her onto the transport.

Rennin steps to the side, finding that his legs are shaking. He feels horrible. His stomach is in knots. He didn't want to hit her. He hit her too hard, he knew, but he was frightened and wanted to be sure he knocked her out. He wouldn't have been able to strike her twice. That's something he knows he just couldn't do.

Yeah, you're a real gentleman, fuckhead.

He pushes his way back through the bustling queue, and back onto the street where he stops and takes account of his surroundings. The whine of engines draws his attention as the ship Carla is on lifts into the sky. Another empty one sets down straight afterwards to begin loading the next lot.

Carla is on her way to safety, Rennin thinks with satisfaction. He sighs deeply, looking over the miasma of people yelling, calling or shouting curses at the soldiers, then slowly turns to face the city.

Not far beyond the crowd the streets are completely deserted; the stark contrast to the madness of the exiting queues is extreme.

"Piece of cake," he says in the words of Basil Fawlty.

Now comes the tricky bit.

◆◆◆

Caufmann enters a heavily restricted room on Arca Drej's level of the lab. This room is at the far end of the hall, constructed underneath the lab proper, personally funded plus some skimmed off the books. The project was done using the sewer system to bring in the required parts.

The room is cylindrical with six pillars around the centre and made from a smooth substance that looks like black rock. The time is fast approaching when he'll need to move Drej but Drake certainly was correct about not being able to do it alone.

His heart is pounding, and he is not sure what to do. This room holds his greatest treasure, at one of the heaviest costs. He has four CryoZaiyon androids here, their stasis pods masquerading as solemn black support pillars, still powered by their own discrete solar generator far above the surface.

They were once intended for the only survivors of the Venus III massacre, but something went very wrong during the retrieval. Forgal Lauros knew they wouldn't live long after they arrived back on Earth, so Caufmann hid himself first. Not long after, just as Forgal predicted, the survivors began dying. Forgal flagged the position of their bodies in a coded message only Caufmann would understand, giving him a chance to collect their bodies and hide them. They weren't dead, Forgal had incapacitated them with a drug Caufmann designed to

knock them out, providing the appearance of death.

The first was Advanced Infantry Trooper Sephirlin Darrad. He was one of the first batch of units built. He was an exemplary solo mission unit, capable of both long and short-term missions behind enemy lines. Forgal and Darrad never saw eye to eye, but he was always a very useful tool.

The next was a captain, Xelxor Akcoda. He was part of the Devastator Program. Built with a heavier chassis than most, the Devastator units were shock troops during the war. Deployed in pods, they were used to pave the way for the Wolf-droid dropships that had once rained like a terrible meteor shower onto the battlefield. Poor Akcoda, last of the Devastators.

Then followed Angelien Zillah, a gargantuan captain of seemingly limitless endurance. She and Saifer Veidan had spent a great deal of the war fighting on the frontline. For a while, Caufmann remembers, the pair of them spent so much time fighting he didn't know if they'd ever be able to stop. Their personalities were so different but at the core, their drives were the same. *Pain.*

The retrieval mission was going as smoothly as could be expected, things were looking up, then something terrible happened. Forgal and Saifer both *actually* died at the same time and were lost to him. As far as Caufmann was concerned, any plans they had died with them.

He was stunned, to say the least. He contemplated shutting down the other pods, allowing the last three CryoZaiyons some final peace; but he discovered he couldn't do it when it came time to flip the switch.

Each pillar has a particular arrangement of glyphs inscribed at the base, symbols Caufmann invented. Each set of glyphs is the identity of the android within. He looks to the pillar inscribed with the name '*Nexarien Decora*'. He stoops, and in one smooth movement sweeps aside the "N" glyph, exposing the hidden plate beneath. Pressing it firmly, the base snaps up and out revealing monitors and a keyboard. The vital signs of the android inside are strong.

He made this tomb for himself as a kind of requiem for the CryoZaiyon he once was. That android is very really dead as far as he's concerned. He doesn't even recognise himself anymore. He built the pillar with full functionality, if a day comes that he finds himself no longer able to continue. And with him would end the last of the CryoZaiyons.

Eventually, though, he found another use for it.

Caufmann had only been Head of Research for five years when the unbelievable occurred. A CryoZaiyon emergency beacon activated.

Caufmann picked up the reading instantly. There was yet another survivor, but this unit couldn't have gone to Venus III. Caufmann

thought it must be a trap, and fought viciously with himself whether to investigate or not. The transponder ID wasn't active and that was too suspicious to be considered.

A day later, a call from Van Gower affirmed that Iyatoya's long-range scanners had picked up a CryoZaiyon distress call.

Van Gower went berserk.

Caufmann recognised the reaction as genuine and ended the call, cursing himself bitterly for not investigating sooner. He didn't know who it was, but he would find out, personally.

It was the first time since the war ended he'd held an assault rifle. Caufmann casually appropriated the helicopter assigned to the abduction of viable targets designated for 'high-level' experiments. So in the interests of plausible deniability, it contained no tracker, ID transponder, or any other distinguishing marks, while in possession of a sturdy stealth system. Caufmann piloted silently across Switzerland, heading directly for the signal's originator.

Caufmann found the location most odd; the Swiss border was neutral ground. He couldn't fathom what a CryoZaiyon would be doing there.

He found the unit in the mountains, a female. Females weren't rare in the CryoZaiyon army, but they weren't as common as males. This was a trooper he'd thought dead a decade before.

She had been shot repeatedly during some kind of escape into the mountains. With her cold blood, and snow all around, she'd become trapped in deep freeze. Caufmann was halfway through breaking her out when Special Forces bearing Iyatoya insignia began showing up on his radar. It was a standard kill squad of six. Three infantry, a medic, a sniper and heavy weapons.

Caufmann had disabled enough of his circuitry by that stage to be completely invisible to their scanners. Their headwear used a filter to search out movement and specific CryoZaiyon traits so Caufmann simply moved to the side, remaining still. They all walked into view once they assumed the area was secure. They called in their location, giving an estimate of their return.

It was their death sentence.

Caufmann stepped out calmly, killing three of them almost unnoticed. The next two never got time to actually see him, but the last looked straight at his glowing eyes coming out of the shadows, but only for an instant before his death.

He took the unconscious unit, who he had identified as Amber Antares, back to his helicopter. He patched her up as best he could but she wouldn't wake. He tried transfusing some of his own blood to her since CryoZaiyon blood types were universal. At least they were supposed to be but Saifer Veidan was flagged to never give blood due

to his many anomalies. Even after getting her back to the lab and repairing all the damage there was too much trauma for her to be brought round.

The last time he saw Antares personally was the closing conflict of the Jupiter Sieges. She'd gone back to Earth with the others afterwards, and during the GA clean up where the last pockets of resistance were beaten down she was registered MIA after her craft was shot down over Europe.

Since he couldn't bring her round, he placed her in his personal tomb capsule where her body would slowly heal completely. That was eight years ago. He'd never intended to leave her there so long, but as each day passed he found less and less reason to try and revive her. He eventually thought it best to let her sleep alongside the others.

Caufmann presses the '*View Unit*' button on the control panel, and the top half of the pillar shell slides back, revealing the sleeping CryoZaiyon.

Antares was an experimental model built three years into the war. She had the strangest effect on Forgal, something similar to severe unease.

Her hair is long, more akin to cables than anything, each a centimetre in diameter. It gives her the appearance of white gold matting. They are just past shoulder length. Caufmann had seen her detach the ends of them at times and place them onto other machines, allowing small tendrils to slither out and interface with the local system, providing free access to hack the CPU, giving her complete control. Caufmann found the trick rather unnerving the first time he witnessed it.

Antares reminds him of Valhara with having a slender build and well-defined musculature. Though Valhara was almost twice her size and all CryoZaiyons have physiques beyond even the most impressive human athletes.

Something about her frame suggests to Caufmann that she was a dancer of some kind in her full-orga life. *Or a weightlifter. Maybe a sprinter?* He shakes his head clear.

He is completely unsure whether to wake her. He had heard nothing of her since her disappearance. She had somehow completely vanished, leaving no traces anywhere.

Even when he'd known her in the past—although 'known' was a loose term—she was always a mystery. He glances to Sephirlin Darrad's current resting place; that CryoZaiyon was a classic soldier, not very useful in a delicate situation, and he certainly wouldn't tolerate Arca Drej's fragile state of being.

But Forgal and Saifer are both dead! He cries in a bitter lament within the confines of his own mind.

Arca needs a woman's touch, he thinks to himself before realising he may know the expression but has no true understanding of the meaning.

Caufmann looks to Angelien Zillah's tube. She was strong and capable but not gentle. Zillah was perfect at assassination, but being such a loner she'd be far too conspicuous in a group of people. She was never one to hide. If Zillah was out and about she'd draw far too much attention.

Zillah would also be furious about being incarcerated for so long. She was incapacitated without her prior knowledge or approval. There were concerns that she wouldn't comply with the plan. Caufmann is starting to think she may have been right to have her reservations. Either way, the last thing she remembers might be betrayal.

No, too risky.

Caufmann winces inwardly looking back at Antares. She worked excellently in team-based operations during the war so, by logical extension, she's the only real choice. Xelxor Akcoda would have *far* too many questions. Caufmann secretly acknowledges that Xelxor is an ideal choice but he is overwhelmed by curiosity about Antares.

He presses the '*Wake Unit*' button. The blue lights of the tank turn green and the water begins draining. Several wired plugs are still attached to her, shocking her mildly to provoke a natural muscle spasm. The pillar case opens, and she falls out onto the floor with a cough.

After a moment, her neon-green eyes flutter open. The first thing she does is look at the back of her left hand. She regards her own body, clad in a rudimentary two piece undergarment, and stands up slowly, taking careful account of her own progress as if scared she'll fall.

Her back is to Caufmann only for a moment. She spins to face him with eyes that are almost psychotic, causing the doctor to wonder if he can draw his gun before she dives at him. He decides to slowly raise his hands, to show he means no harm. He removes his glasses to show her he's like her.

Antares seems to relax a little. "Medtech…" she says taking a breath.

So her memory is intact. "You've been asleep for quite a while."

"Where am I?" she says completely still, but her muscles are fully tensed, ready to spring on anything perceived to be a threat.

"Godyssey Genetics Laboratory, we—"

At the mention of Godyssey her eyes brighten. She leaps straight at him, pushing him up against a wall. Even her long period in stasis hasn't affected her strength. Caufmann can hardly move. Her eyes dart over his uniform then focus on his face.

“What are *you* doing in a Godyssey installation?” she asks so calmly it makes his skin crawl.

I should have woken Xelxor. “I’m head of research here, and have been for ten years.”

“What year is it?”

“October 18th, 2319.”

“Where’s my husband?”

That completely stumps Caufmann. “Husband?”

She grips his neck, hands tightening like a vice and bares her teeth. “You were one of his confidants, and since you’re still alive you’d know.”

Caufmann represses the rapidly increasing urge to defend himself. “Whom are you talking about?”

“Forgal! *Where is he*?”

For the second time in half a minute Caufmann is absolutely speechless. He blinks a couple of times to take it in. “He was never married. He’s an android.”

“We had a daughter.” Her eyes have a maddened look, but there’s also absolute certainty.

Caufmann thinks for a moment. “That’s impossible.”

“I traced my daughter’s whereabouts towards the end of the war, but when I went looking I was captured by Van Gower. He kept me locked up in a bunker. Couldn’t erase my memories but he found me amusing. Disabled my combat protocols, used me as an experiment.”

Caufmann’s head was starting to swim but not from being strangled. “Why?”

“He hates us. He’s scared to death of us. He was so convinced that we were going to turn on him, he tried to make me his pet. Then from me, he’d know how to enslave us all. He chose me because Forgal saw me as his equal during life, and through me he might gain an insight into him. That’s the only reason I was converted in the first place. He was so sure Forgal was self-aware that he constructed me to prove it, as some kind of test. It failed, he didn’t know me.”

No, there was something else about you that warranted your conversion. “But you knew him.”

“I retained almost everything. In the mayhem of the Jupiter Sieges I deserted. I detonated my craft to simulate a crash, then went looking for my daughter. I did eventually find her,” she trails off for a moment before regaining her focus. “She died aged eighty-five, over a century before the war started.”

“How did you get caught?”

“How *didn’t* you?” she asks glaring at him, with very real fury in her eyes.

Caufmann undoes his jacket and shows her the sea of scars that

was once a torso. “Satisfied?”

She looks him over, her face completely unreadable. She releases her grip around his throat. “I’d almost escaped Austria. I was captured crossing the border into Germany.”

“Germany?”

“CryoGen Industries began there. I had reason to believe it holds knowledge that I could have used.”

Caufmann shakes his head. “To what end?”

She points to her chest.

The Instinctual Cluster. “You want to remove it?”

“I want to *destroy* it.”

“You can’t do that. If you do, it will disrupt the synchronicity with your other major and minor systems. Your programming is designed to predict IC emissions when none are present. If you destroy it, your computer mind will continue to predict your actions and drives with increasing inaccuracy.”

“It has to be taken out. It’s how they’re going to enslave us,” says Antares.

“Us?”

A realisation dawns on Caufmann.

She doesn’t know about Venus III.

“Captain—”

“For six years I was in that pit. I couldn’t attack or so much as think of attacking someone without being punished. They laid traps inside my mind that followed my thought processes,” she interjects, gritting her teeth. “Van Gower kept at me, grinding me down, until he was sure I had no avenues left for hostilities towards anyone deemed an asset. I was put in thousands of simulations. Forced to kill on command. Over and over.”

Caufmann feels sick. This exact scenario always scared him. He can’t help but feel glad it was her, not him. He inwardly admits that he wouldn’t feel this empathy if she had been human. “How did you escape?”

“He failed to consider one thing. I couldn’t hurt *people*. After a while I stopped seeing my captors as such. Once that happened, I killed them. It seemed so much harder than in the war. It was difficult to break them, even in my frenzy. But they’re dead now, the guards, the researchers.”

“You mentioned Van Gower was there,” says Caufmann.

“Not when I escaped. I turned that bunker inside out,” she says.

“He seemed genuinely horrified when I told him about your distress signal.”

“He should be,” she says bitterly. “When I got out I was wounded. I just ran and ran until I couldn’t make it any further.”

“But if Van Gower didn’t know you were there, who—”

“No more questions,” she says facing him fully. “Nexarien… Where is my husband?” she asks, her voice cracking slightly.

Caufmann’s head lowers. “He’s dead. He died a year after you went missing.”

Her shoulders slump immediately and she begins to cry. Caufmann has never seen an android cry. It is one of the things he has always thought to be impossible, but there is a strange sense in it. Looking at this poor thing, this poor *person*. He understands something about true sentience that hits him like being struck in the face.

Each android built holds something individual, that survives conversion. Xelxor Akcoda’s sense of duty crossed over into his android life, Sephirlin Darrad’s anger, and Caufmann’s own hunger for knowledge. Zillah and Saifer both share pain. Though something more carried over with them, Saifer was loyal even if disobedient at times, and Zillah believed in sacrifice. Sacrifice of herself for the betterment of all.

Like Saifer and Zillah, Forgal also brought pain. Pain from the grief of loss. But Amber Antares brought her love with her. It must have been very present in her mind at the time of her conversion. She loved her husband. *Still* loves her husband. Her shining eyes remain closed and her posture is one of complete and utter defeat.

“How did it happen?” she manages.

Her loss doesn’t merely consist of her partner, alone. She has lost everything. Worse still, it was taken from her very purposefully by an all-encompassing corporate entity fuelled by a dead heart. She has lost her family, her parents, and her child. Forgal was the only thing left, the last vestige of hope. And now that’s gone, too.

Caufmann relays the whole story of Venus III’s aftermath, how he was to retrieve the bodies one by one. He explains that Forgal and Saifer both died very suddenly. “They went off my scanners about half an hour before their life signs went flat. I looked for them, believe me, I looked. I spent weeks investigating the wreckage of their last mission but the whole area was just a crater.”

He takes her by the arm and leads her to Forgal and Saifer’s tomb pillars.

“This was where I was going to store them until the time was right. It was rather pointless bringing the empty chambers here once I was established in my position and had built this tomb but they serve now as memorials, I suppose, so at least there’s someone to remember them and what they tried to do.”

She’s still crying, “Why did you wake me and not the others?”

Caufmann isn’t sure if he can bring himself to ask anything of her. But he has to. “There’s a very sick android I need taken out of the

city."

"His name?"

"Arca Drej."

"I don't have any data on him."

"When I delete the restrictive programs in your mind I'll update all your general knowledge. For the moment I'll just say he's a HolinMech."

"They're building HolinMechs again? Those are the slaves Godyssey want as their pets, why should *we* help one of them?"

"It's not his fault he is what he is. Just the same as it's not our fault we are what we are. That didn't stop the Gorai Aurelia wanting every one of us dead. Let's not be like them, shall we?"

The first of the contaminants to be out during daylight emerges from an apartment complex in the Centre-city District. It was formerly a young man by the name of Michael Troy, who contracted the disease through his girlfriend.

She is back at the apartment and very hungry. She can no longer pass for human. The further she fades from humanity, the more control she seems to have over Troy. He can barely remember what she looked like before, but she had the most beautiful sea blue eyes. Yet that is not all he's lost.

Troy can still think rudimentary thoughts but every hour there's less and less. He's tired after being out most of the night looking for food. When he eats, a surge of energy picks him up and he doesn't understand how he could ever feel tired. However, the longer between food, whether it be leftovers, road-kill or fresh skin and bone, the more exhausted he becomes.

It won't be long before he can no longer pass for human either. Another day, and the black veins snaking up his neck will be protruding all over his face. The colour in his irises is also rapidly clouding.

Troy limps out of the darkened doorway, instantly spotting a man carrying a briefcase, walking quickly on the sidewalk of the nearly deserted street. He's dressed in an impeccable suit, his head down, moving in quite a hurry.

He doesn't notice the once human creature; his mind is focussed wholly on a very important appointment with his accountant. He has never been late in his life and has no intention of starting now. Troy is hungry and so is his girlfriend. That is all that matters to him.

He can feel something at the far recesses of his mind trying to

resist, but with each new infection his own mind becomes less and less dominant. The wants of one are insignificant to the wants of them all. Each new infection gives a new voice to the mass of minds he can hear. All think, feel and become each other. His memories are already bleeding into others, as those bleed into his. He can hear the ones that are sick very vaguely, but when they became like him they would be heard clearly and proudly. Accepted.

The man begins to walk faster. He can hear someone behind him, but Troy is already very close. The contaminant jumps, landing on the man's back, sinking his teeth into the back of his neck. The man screams in pain at first but after the first chunk is torn out he begins to quieten down, very quickly subsiding into unintelligible gibbering, interspersed with pitiable begging.

Troy still understands most words but he can't stop himself tearing the flesh to pieces and swallowing it in whole chunks. By the time he feels healthy enough to drag the rest home to his girlfriend, the man is bleeding everywhere, still muttering. "But I'm going to be late," he manages, his expression utter disbelief. The shock from his wounds has left him a mess.

Another chunk is taken for good measure.

"I have an appointment."

Troy grips him by the ankle.

"My accountant…" he says groggily staring out into nothing.

Troy starts to drag him.

"I have an appointment," he struggles out one last time.

Troy feels happy now. He feels ecstatic, even. When he eats he feels like he can run around the world. His girlfriend will be happy too. They can be happy and eat. They can eat and eat for days with this whole body. Children are easier to carry but they just don't last. The pair of them have eaten a full child in just over a day, not even enough time for it to begin spoiling.

A click from behind gives him a fright. He turns around to see the face of a soldier. A huge individual with black skin, strong frame and piercing onyx eyes. Demon Coal-something, Troy recalls. Voices of others react in fear, they know him too. Another voice, still with most of its original Separate senses, speaks the name into Troy's mind: Damon Kowalski.

Troy feels a horrible fear as three bullets tear through his chest. The pain isn't very intense, but the force knocks him clean off his feet. *Damon Kowalski*. Troy takes a spasmodic breath and looks upwards as the soldier's face comes into view above him. *No*, he thinks, *Demon, he's a demon.*

There's a flash from the Demon's gun, then nothing.

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Rennin is in his apartment, digging through his cupboard. He throws his old S-type CryoZaiyon armour onto his bed. Beneath his old war boots he finds a case, precious to him, containing his very illegal sniper rifle from the war.

This rifle, unlike the one he has at work, can shoot further, zoom closer on any target; and is undetectable by x-ray. With a few of the parts from his rifle at the lab, this weapon will be more efficient with a larger magazine. Even as it is, this rifle is completely outlawed to civilians, mostly due to its stopping power. A graze can shatter bone. He was supposed to hand it in when the war ended, but he hid it instead. Five years later, he has found himself dragging it back out. Since he's military again he can take it out and carry it around everywhere just as he used to.

A knock at his front door draws his attention. In recent memory he can't recall anyone ever coming to see him, and the sound of a knock on his door is almost alien. If they had thermal-vision they could just shoot through the door when he comes to open it. He shakes off his paranoia and steps silently over to the entry.

He presses the transparency button, revealing someone he never thought he would see out of the lab: Mepida Rethrin. He opens the door, and she doesn't wait for an invitation to enter. She barges straight in, instructing him to shut the door behind her.

"Oh please, come in. Should I get you something to drink?"

"Look, Farrow, I didn't want to come here, but I can't be seen at the lab since I gave up all that information to the press. You're the only one I can think of."

"For what?"

She holds out an A4 sized envelope. "William needs to see this, it's important."

"What is it?"

"You can open it if you like, but it might not make much sense."

"Why do *I* have to deliver it?"

"I can't mail it, the postal service is discontinued since the virus and I can't risk anything digital, there's just too many eyes around."

Good to see he's not the only one who's paranoid. "I guess it can't hurt. I have to go to the lab to pick up my rifle, so I'll drop it off then."

"No. *Give* it to him. It must be placed *in his hand*, not left on his desk."

She looks serious but there's definitely a plea in her words. "Alright."

"You'll make sure?"

He holds up his right hand. “By the power of Greyskull, I will see to it.”

She nods, visibly relaxing. “Thank you.”

Obviously she has never seen He-Man. “Anything else?”

“No,” she says, and her gaze goes distant. “I have to get to the Skyhook.”

He nods and looks at the envelope. “What happens if I’m caught carrying it?”

She remains quiet for a moment. “Get it to him quickly.” After that she leaves.

Rennin stays by the front door staring at the envelope. It isn’t long before he can’t help himself and has to open it. He takes it to his dining table, placing the single piece of paper inside face up.

His fascination evaporates when he sees it. It’s an A4 printout of Forgal Lauros. *It’s a nice picture*, he admits, *really captures his arms and glowing eyes*, he thinks with a smirk.

He’s wearing a suit of armour that’s grey rather than his usual black. He’s also holding a pulse rifle. It looks to be security footage from somewhere or other.

He shrugs to himself, turning to grab himself a drink from the fridge. He opens it and takes a few swigs, then freezes, feeling the hairs on his arms stand on end. The drink is still tilted, continuing to pour down his front but he doesn’t notice, he just turns to face the image on the table.

He puts the drink down roughly and walks back over to the picture. He picks it up looking closely at it. Forgal looks exactly how Rennin remembers him. He increases his scrutiny, knowing something is out of place. The armour configuration matches his memory, as does Forgal’s face. It’s when he looks at the gun that something clicks in his mind.

Rennin enjoys perusing the latest weapons magazines and is dumbfounded. “That gun was only made last year…” he says as it dawns on him. “You’re alive.”

◆◆◆

Half an hour later Rennin storms through the lab entrance finding what can only be described as a shambles. The foyer is ripped to pieces, burning. Security staff lay dead all over the place, some with holes through them, others apparently bludgeoned by the looks of them. None that he can see look like they’ve been struck with claws or been bitten.

Can’t be contaminants.

He reverts to decades old training. His attempts to tread lightly but his heavier left leg thuds just that little bit louder. He doesn't really need to know where he's going, he just has to follow the carnage. Something ripped the entire Godyssey security force to pieces with minimal damage to property. He can see some of the dead have crushed limbs and an image enters his mind of Prototype and the aftermath of their rooftop encounter. He grunts in frustration at the thought of the damned thing still being alive.

He reaches an emergency stairwell, following the gore down several flights. He tracks the smatterings of blood that vary from a few drops to smears of grotesque viscera until he arrives at the hatch to one of the lowest levels. He leans over the handrail, looking further down the stairwell.

No further evidence of a struggle is apparent, so he levers open the hatch cover to access Base Level 3, the first level of the Test Labs. He's never been down here before. Until recently it was the restricted wing.

More bodies, still very few shots fired. Whatever took them out was fast and viciously efficient. A little further down the hallway, Rennin finds something strange. It is a shimmering purplish puddle next to one of the walls that looks like partially coagulated blood.

Is it contaminant blood? Or some other kind of infected individual?

He continues for a few more paces before faint gunfire brings him up short. Rennin looks around, ensuring he has a doorway to duck into for cover should he need it.

Jogging slowly down the hallway towards the gunfire, he sees a familiar shape through a lab window. Slowing for a moment, his brain catches up.

Del!

He realises the great android is powered down in a massive cradle or over the top chair, though he does not seem connected to any mainframe. A weapons rack is exposed near him.

The hell are they doing?

He soon happens upon a security door down the end of the corridor. It's one of the fully armoured doors designed to stop anything getting out. By Rennin's reckoning, it must be some kind of testing ground for Del. He presses the panel on the side but the borders of the door flash red. He curses. He can hear the gunfire clearly now, then there's a rumble of an explosion.

Thinking quickly, Rennin bolts back up the corridor to Del's room and enters. The lights flicker on automatically yet the android remains powered down. He grabs the grenade launcher from the weapons rack and steps back into the corridor, briefly wishing he had some sunglasses to pull off the complete Terminator look.

He launches three grenades up the corridor towards the armoured door. When they detonate, his obstruction is completely obliterated. He looks back into the room to see Del's head is up, facing him. A rush of goosebumps cover Rennin's body in a brief wave.

"Hey, big fella."

Rennin runs up to the blasted door and looks in. There's a rigged obstacle course but no one inside, no one living at least. There's a significant hole in the floor and the gunfire is louder from below but still not very close.

He lugs the grenade launcher over to the hole, looking down to see the floor below at about a five-metre plunge. He drops down, crashing to the floor relying on his strengthened bones to hold their own against gravity. His bones do just fine but his muscles and tendons twang with sharp pain causing him to fall on his stomach. He struggles to his feet, limping slightly. A few steps away, he finds himself in another test chamber.

More blood.

Following the cloying trail, he is lead through a blown out side door. He goes up an identical corridor to the floor above, muttering and swearing enough to turn Satan's face white when he realises he's been led back to the same stairwell he started in.

Down we go.

He can't hear the gunfire anymore but whoever is shooting must have chased whatever it is down there. It's the only possible place left to look.

Rennin gets to Base Level 5, the lowest in the lab and also the largest. He runs through the white corridors, checking every room he comes across but finds no living people. Guards, scientists and test subjects are all dead, either shot, crushed or burned. The blood is still red so he takes that to mean he must be very close. His body shudders with goosebumps again and he looks behind to see that Del has followed him.

The great android crouches near him, completely still. Rennin asks him what he's doing but Del makes no visible effort to respond. Rennin looks around his position but can't decide on a direction. "Del, can you hear the firefight?"

Del doesn't respond.

"Nod if you can hear me."

Del nods.

"Okay, can you lead me there? Nod for yes, shake for no."

Del nods.

"Alright good," says Rennin.

Del doesn't move.

Rennin waits for a few painstaking moments then leans closer to

Del with a frustrated expression. “Any time, pal.”

Del remains still.

Rennin is getting agitated but remembers that machines need to be told—to the letter—what to do sometimes. *For fucks sake.* “Take me to the fight.”

Del gets up immediately and jogs up the left corridor.

The blind android hurries around several corners, down another flight of stairs, and to a level that has no visible indicators that it is even there. Not that Rennin’s surprised.

They enter a rather narrow corridor. The door at the far end is open, revealing a large round room. As they approach and their view widens before them, six pillars seem to circle the room, becoming the major focus.

Del runs in first with Rennin following, guns in hand. They wander into a maelstrom of fire from both sides of the room. Rennin takes cover, peeking out to see Caufmann and Drake crouched behind a pillar halfway across the room with the soldier laying down an intense amount of suppressive fire.

Behind the pillar closest to him is Mia Saker, desperately trying to stop the bleeding from a gaping hole in her leg. To the right he sees Isfeohrad, the Prototype, hiding behind a pillar blasting back. Rennin’s assessment of the room takes less than a second, but that is enough for Isfeohrad to take a pot shot at him. The bullet grazes his arm but he makes it to Mia’s pillar. “What the *hell* is going on?”

“Half the security squads were dead before we realised anything was wrong,” says Mia through gritted teeth. She is sweating profusely from the pain.

“Loading!” calls Drake and Caufmann opens fire with his handgun.

“What is this room?”

“How should I know? We followed it,” she says, nodding at Isfeohrad. The hands covering her wound are shaking. There’s a lot of blood.

“Stay still for a sec,” says Rennin taking his belt off and looking towards Del. He’s still standing in the doorway, facing everything and nothing. Rennin guesses Isfeohrad isn’t taking a shot at him until it has to. Del hasn’t done anything yet, so it would appear the prototype sees no sense in provoking an eight-foot android.

“Rennin! It’s coming at you!” yells Drake.

Rennin pictures in his mind which pillar is closest and judges where Isfeohrad would be if it is coming straight at him. He hugs the pillar, reaching around with his shooting arm and empties his clip, firing blind. He hears a surprised grunt as at least one of the bullets finds its mark. Drake starts shooting again and Rennin risks a quick

glance out to see Isfeohrad back at the other pillar. “Yeah, you remember *that* gun, don’t you?”

“Farrow, help me up. I’m going to fill that fuck so full of lead it won’t be able to move,” says Mia, beginning to slur from shock.

Rennin wraps his belt around Mia’s injured leg above the thigh and tightens it very hard. She grunts in pain but accepts it. “You need treatment. Stay here and don’t shoot, you’re just as likely to hit us as it,” he says reloading Killjoy.

He risks another glance around the pillar. A green laser dot from Isfeohrad’s direction is aimed at Drake and Caufmann. He has just enough time to register that in the android military, green is for grenade. There’s a clinking sound a split second before an explosion behind their cover from the android’s shot. The grenade missed both of them but the concussive force in such a small area is enough to throw Drake out of cover rendering him unconscious. Caufmann was closer and took more of the blast, most of his coat is scorched and his skin is torn from shrapnel. Rennin is mystified at the amount of smoke Caufmann’s body seems to be emanating.

Isfeohrad is very quick. It’s over to Caufmann in an instant, slamming its knee into his head, driving him into the wall. Rennin is out of cover and running over to help, Killjoy looking for a target, a perfect shot to take it out for good. Rennin slows to take aim but Isfeohrad has a hand outstretched his direction. The gesture looks like it’s saying ‘come no further’ but a sudden blast of energy erupts, surging at Rennin. He didn’t know they could do that.

It hits him square in the chest throwing him off his feet and into the wall, hard. He hears more than two ribs snap on impact and falls limply to the ground badly winded. He manages to get to his hands and knees and coughs some blood onto the floor, “Del,” he half spits. The android faces towards him but doesn’t respond.

Prototype and Caufmann are locked at each other’s throats, each gritting their teeth. The progenitor takes a swing. Caufmann ducks and shoves Isfeohrad away with both hands. The mist from Caufmann’s wounds is filling the room making it hard to see. Caufmann’s eyes stand out like some kind of spectre in haze.

Isfeohrad looks Caufmann over regarding his steaming blood. “You’re not human, but you don’t show up on my scanners as android. What are you?”

Caufmann spits some freezing blood into Isfeohrad’s face and slams his fist across its jaw throwing it back a few paces. “I might ask you the same question.”

Isfeohrad hurls an energy stream at Caufmann that looks like green lightning but the doctor slaps it with his hand, absorbing the energy and electrifying his eyes. “What *are* you?” yells Isfeohrad more

in alarm than rage.

Caufmann's veins in his arms and the sides of his face are glowing green, spreading up to his eyes, which look to be made of pure energy. "We're registered as dead, what does it matter?"

Isfeohrad screeches and blasts at him again but Caufmann slaps it aside again, this time generating an angry green aura. "You have lost," calls the progenitor.

Caufmann doesn't answer, but slowly steps forward. Still engulfed in energy, he is forcing Isfeohrad back little by little. Caufmann smiles and speaks in a voice so soft that only his enemy can hear him. "Unit ee-ex-zero-zero-eight-eight, Medtech, Cyclone Division, Rupture Team."

Despite the sheer horror on Isfeohrad's face it manages to draw a hidden pistol so fast it looks like a cut-scene. It fires a bullet into Caufmann's chest throwing him off his feet, onto his back. Rennin calls to Del. "Can you tell which one is the progenitor chassis?" he gasps.

Del nods.

"I want you to focus on the progenitor!" Rennin takes a careful breath. He doesn't want to say what's he's about to utter. It's a death sentence to all of them if Del can't distinguish which is which, but then again they're all dead if Isfeohrad kills Caufmann. It's a command that all combat model androids have ingrained into them. An autopilot-like command designed to make a unit act quickly and decisively. "You got it, Del?"

Del nods.

"Weapons free!"

Del's head snaps around to face Isfeohrad. A harsh vibration bursts outwards from his body. Rennin shudders as goosebumps appear all over him, causing a brief tickling of pins and needles. It feels like a pressure is building inside his head along with a bass hum in his ears.

Isfeohrad obviously picked up the sonar pulse because it is facing Del with a look of disbelief.

The giant android springs into action, running directly at Isfeohrad opening his mouth and letting out a violent snarl. The progenitor fires at Del with what's left in the gun but the bullets either bounce off Del's armour plates or simply cannot penetrate his hide, falling harmlessly to the floor. Once Del is within reach Isfeohrad throws a punch. Del blocks impossibly quickly, grabbing the wrist then bringing his other arm up, snapping its elbow the wrong way. Though Isfeohrad is disabled Del continues his assault, bringing his knee up to crush the progenitor's abdomen. The progenitor-class leans forward in shock and Del performs a downward left hook to

Isfeohrad's face. There is no doubt it could have smashed through a concrete wall. The android's head snaps left leaving it completely vulnerable. Del grabs its broken arm and throws the progenitor like a stone across the room. Isfeohrad collides with the doorframe on its way out of the chamber, into the hallway skidding along the floor.

In the brief lull, Isfeohrad climbs to its feet, vomiting up a hideous looking liquid before retreating up the corridor away from the pillared chamber. It risks a glance behind as it feels a grating vibration ripple across it. Del is regarding it closely.

Del doesn't waste any more time and shoots off after it. Caufmann calls after him, but he's completely fixated. The doctor limps over to Rennin holding his chest wound. It's not too severe, Caufmann's bones are too strong. The doctor clamps his hand hard on Rennin's shoulder. "Did you say 'weapons free?'"

"It was the only way to make him do something," Rennin says, obviously rather shocked at being dressed down.

Caufmann releases him. "I'm not upset with you, Ren, I'm just confused. I never programmed that in," he says and a grin crosses his face. "He got that from you. He *works*!"

Rennin is looking Caufmann up and down, mesmerized by the steaming injuries. "You're badly wounded."

"There's nothing I can do about that."

Rennin suddenly zones out. With the mist in the air coming off Caufmann's body and the words 'there's nothing I can do' repeating in his head it floods his mind with images from the dream he had the night before.

He looks to Caufmann's face and can't, for the life of him, understand how he never put that together. "Medtech?"

Caufmann eyes him for a moment *very* enigmatically causing Rennin to wonder if he's just uttered his last word. Caufmann puts his hand back on Rennin's shoulder. "After we take care of Prototype, I'll make sure to fill you in," he says as a loud blast blares from upstairs, followed by the chamber shaking.

Drake is on his feet again. "Where did it go?" he calls.

Caufmann turns to him. "Drake, get Saker some help immediately. Rennin and I will go after Del. Take her to emergency treatment down the main hall on the left then come to our position," he says just like the soldier he once was. They break off, following the sounds of the battle up and up the stairwell.

Rennin's head is spinning. He's still short of breath due to what feels like a punctured lung but he can't believe he's running into a fight with *the* Nexarien Decora. He's reeling that he didn't recognise him earlier. It is true that he only saw him during his brutal recovery from Indigo Reign, but still. In another way it might explain why

Caufmann has kept him around so long. Rennin is still at a loss to how these events have all come together since Venus III. The watchman and the other CryoZaiyon S troops were decommissioned two days after the CryoZaiyon androids left for the ice planetoid.

Del has Isfeohrad on the run. The progenitor has attempted to distract or trap the larger android but Del simply outmatches it with sheer force. Isfeohrad is cornered, looking to be panicking at the time Caufmann and Rennin come bounding in after tracking them down.

They are fighting on a floor full of offices, but most of the office partitions are now shattered debris. Rennin is puffing like mad after the ten-storey climb, but can almost taste the progenitor's capture.

Isfeohrad's left arm is completely useless. Del's manoeuvre viciously dislodged the elbow joint completely, but the android is still a formidable foe. Even for Del.

Isfeohrad ejects a flare from its good hand, so bright it blinds both Caufmann and Rennin. They scramble to the floor, feeling around for cover. Having no eyes, Del is completely unaffected. That is something the progenitor clearly didn't expect. It thought that the blind android's sensory system might be scrambled, but Del ends that possibility by rushing at it to land a left strike, a right, then a heavier left throwing Isfeohrad off its feet. The blows are so fierce it sounds like someone is kicking an empty chemical drum.

Del grips Isfeohrad by its long cable-strand hair, and tosses it into the air. For a brief moment the progenitor is suspended, completely defenceless. Del uses this opportunity to blast a hole clean through its torso with his inbuilt wrist gun.

Rennin is still blinded but Caufmann has recovered, half dragging and half carrying him free of the battle. Rennin is swearing and cursing but Caufmann reassures him that his sight will return.

Del's composure is one of infinite patience while waiting for the maimed progenitor to rise. The splatter marks where the android's blood hit the wall steam and bubble in a corrosive, acidic kind of way.

A battered Isfeohrad slowly climbs to its feet losing fluid, clutching its abdomen on the left side with its one good arm. Caufmann has set Rennin down in the stairwell and is back in the destroyed office space.

The progenitor reaches into its coat. Del's entire body visibly tenses waiting for an attack. Caufmann's eyes are two beacons of murderous rage as he raises his gun for a kill shot. Isfeohrad produces a cylindrical object about the size of a spray can. Caufmann's eyes betray his horror and that break in his concentration gives Isfeohrad enough time to press the red detonate button, drop it, and spring towards the windows in one fluid movement. Caufmann grabs Del's arm and leaps for the stairwell doorway with everything he's got.

“NAPA bomb!”

A grid pattern shoots out at a modest spherical distance; little bigger than half the floor space itself but the blast is powerful enough to push Isfeohrad out of the window as well as throwing Del and Caufmann down the stairwell with Rennin. Some debris falls on them but they’re relatively unscathed. An emergency message flashes on Caufmann’s forearm: ‘*NAPA bomb incoming!*’

“Prototype threw another one. Move!” he yells, grabbing them both and hauling them downstairs just as the second blast tears through the walls of the stairwell, ripping it apart around them.

On the ground floor, Drake falls over when the second blast hits, vastly more powerful than the first. Mia Saker is stable in an emergency procedures ward, being tended to by an automated nurse. Several of the staff have come out of hiding to assess the damage and casualties of Isfeohrad’s sudden and ferocious assault.

Drake braces himself, gritting his teeth as he hears several of the floors above come crashing down. He waits for several long moments after the initial collapse ceases just to make sure the ceiling isn’t going to cave in on him, then hurries for the stairwell.

The first doorway he hurries past ejects a badly damaged Caufmann. His clothes are torn, tattered and on fire. Drake lowers his gun and is about to speak when Rennin and Del follow Caufmann out. Rennin doesn’t look much better than the doctor. Apart from being filthy Del looks fine. Drake wonders how they got down so fast but by the looks of them, they were assisted by the blast. Caufmann tells Drake to follow and the four of them head back down to the lowest level.

Approaching Room XVI, Caufmann begins to explain to Drake and Rennin about Arca Drej and Amber Antares. Their level of surprise is mitigated by their exhaustion. Caufmann leaves out certain details about Antares, her marriage being the first and foremost. Rennin eyes Drej with his still blurry vision but can make out the unstable expression on the android’s face. Caufmann steps over to him. “How are your eyes, Ren?”

“I think I’m coming out of it.”

“We could have used your help out there before,” says Drake to Drej and Antares.

“Your puerile insufficiencies are your own concern. And one CryoZaiyon should have been more than adequate,” says Antares looking over Caufmann’s worn appearance.

“And Arca is in no condition to be thrown into a fight at a moment’s notice,” says Caufmann.

Antares runs a hand through her thick cable-hairs. They look almost wet or glossy, like silvery snakeskin. “Now what are we going to do? People will come any minute and begin locking this place down to search it.”

“You and Arca will go through the sewers with Drake and Saker, if she’s able in time,” says Caufmann.

“She’ll be fine,” says Drake. “The machine said the tissue damage will heal in a few hours with that Regenus gel. What is that stuff anyway? How’s it work?”

Antares looks to Caufmann, alarmed, “Regenus gel?”

“It’s complicated and it’s better that you don’t know,” says Caufmann.

“Top secret?” asks Drake.

“No, just unpleasant.”

Drej speaks, eyes darting around uncertainly, “I don’t want to go through the sewers.”

“It’s the only way, Arca,” Caufmann points out wearily.

“Something wants to get out of there. I can hear it calling for help.”

Caufmann frowns and looks to Antares, “Have you heard anything?”

She shakes her head, “No. He started hearing it before I was brought in. And he was adamant he’s been hearing it for at least an hour. He told me to listen, but I couldn’t hear anything. Nothing on scanners either.”

“We have no other choice then, it has to be the sewer,” says Caufmann to Drej.

Drej is wrapped up in his bed sheet, his armour piled in the corner of the cell. He looks at the floor. “I wanted to get out of here so badly; but I’m not sure I should now.”

“Why not?”

“I,” he stops, closing his eyes and tilting his neck to one side. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“You’re going to be fine, Arca, you have Antares and two others to guide you.”

“I can’t go through the sewers, sir. I don’t trust myself. I’d rather be found and executed than do something a scared animal does.”

Antares shakes her head. “If he can’t go through the sewers, it’s just that simple. We need another way.”

Rennin speaks, “You’re sending Del to help with Horizon Military, right?”

Caufmann nods.

“Suit these two up in full combat gear, helmets, everything, and use them as Del’s support. They don’t have transponders, and as long as no one sees their eyes and they don’t act superhuman no one will be any wiser,” says the watchman.

“Not a bad idea,” says Antares, her eyes questing to Drej for confirmation.

“I could do that. Probably,” says Drej pensively.

“Sequester a gunship and you can make your own team,” says Rennin to Caufmann.

“I’m not sure I have that authority,” says Caufmann.

“If they see what Del can do, they’ll give you whatever you want.”

Caufmann looks to Del, who’s standing in the corner of the room silently, and smiles. “Alright, done. I’ll get them to assign you to me, along with Drake, Saker and a few others.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” says Rennin grinning.

“The outbreak is already accelerating according to the reports,” Caufmann says eyeing his forearm display. Its flashing images indicate small firefights breaking out across the city, its military personnel milling around like ants. “We have to try and save Raddocks Horizon so you’ll have to make a stand. With the power we possess we can’t just abandon the people here. But once the retreat is called, that’s when you desert, understood?” he asks, making sure to make eye contact with everyone.

Most nod but Drake doesn’t. “I don’t think Mia will ever desert.”

“Her choice,” says Caufmann indifferently, “but remaining behind in the fire zone when the Desolator satellites activate is lunacy, and she can’t do anything once trapped inside the Centre-city safe zone.”

“I’ll talk to her,” says Drake.

“It’s also *very* important that you *all* get out. Avoid the Skyhook if you can, I’ll provide enough data on this infection to trade in case anyone picks you up; it’ll make it look like you had to flee for a reason.” His expression turns dark. “But if Godyssey make a move on you, shoot them down. No exceptions.”

There’s a mild silence in the room after that statement but a rush of goosebumps makes everyone face Del. He is now leaning in Drej’s direction, as if sniffing. He steps off the wall and walks a few paces to stand in front of the HolinMech who looks up at him with wild red eyes. Del glances to Caufmann and his forearm display flashes text, *Deserter is wounded.*

Caufmann looks over at Drej. “He looks fine.”

Multiple lacerations to legs, arms and chest. Concentrations of Thermosteel under cot mattress.

Caufmann looks from his display to Drej. “Stand up, Arca.”

Drej does so but keeps the sheet tightly held around him. “What’s wrong?”

Noticing the whiteness on Drej’s knuckles the doctor grows very suspicious. “Drop the sheet.”

“Why?”

Del rips the sheet out of Drej’s grasp with a lightning fast movement revealing Drej’s naked body. His sea of sliced flesh is exposed. Long scars run down his thighs and down his calves. Three gouges run across his chest, and others down his arms, always down the bone. The wounds are held together with extremely fine cable. Caufmann knows better. “Is that stitching made of your muscle fibre?”

“I’m not finished,” says Drej simply.

Drake takes a step back. “What the fuck have you done to yourself?”

Even Antares is shocked. “I didn’t even know he was cut, there’s no blood.”

“What were you doing?” asks Caufmann slowly.

Drej turns and lifts his mattress, producing a pearlescent bladed knife and the hilt of a sword with a partly formed blade.

“I’m making these. I pressed the fibres into a shape,” his fingers glow with energy, “ then sealed it.”

Caufmann is intrigued. The others are disgusted or frightened.

“Thermosteel weapons?” asks the doctor.

Drej nods, “Part of me.”

“Why?”

“The thing calling for help from under the city likes to talk. It told me that my swords aren’t enough. I must turn my body into a weapon. After a while I figured out how.”

“You’ve been left in here too long, Arca, we’re taking you out of here,” says Caufmann shaking his head at how far gone Drej has become in the many weeks of solitary confinement.

“I can feel with these blades. Not when they’re on the floor,” he says placing the bone-knife down, “but when I hold it,” he says picking it up again. “I can feel with the tip of it like it’s my own finger.”

Rennin takes a breath wearily. “So you’ll be able to feel ‘yourself’ enter another’s body when you stab them, and you think that’s, somehow, going to help you become a more balanced individual?”

Drej points at Caufmann, “He cuts into himself.”

Suggestion: Let Deserter finish his construct, displays Del.

“Why?” asks Caufmann.

Then his insanity has run its course. More feasible therapy can begin. Swords made of self denotes need for defence, building own being into something stronger. I was told in my first combat protocols that a weapon

must be an extension of oneself. Derangement has made statement literal; a confidence of body. If Deserter does not finish the sword, he will be incomplete.

Caufmann looks at Del with something like pride in his scarred eyes. He looks to Rennin. “He works, Rennin.”

The watchman isn’t sure how to react so just says the first thing he thinks of. “I know it.”

“Alright, Arca, finish the sword, but that is all. *No more* cutting into yourself afterwards. We don’t have time. How are you growing it back so fast?”

Drej shrugs. “I just think about it. They grow back like human bones, just faster. I try to imagine it growing back and when I open my eyes my bones where I started from were healed. Then I just kept doing circuits around my body, opening up the wounds in the order I made them and taking more. Sometimes thinking about it didn’t work and I’d have to *really* focus. Burns a lot of energy.”

“How long before you finish?”

“Eight hours if I really try.”

Caufmann nods then turns to Antares. “Get back to the tombs and let the automated system scan you. It’ll open up a cache of your armour and weapons, then return here,” the doctor says, turning to Rennin. “Report to your barracks before you’re registered as AWOL,” he says turning to Drake. “Stay with Arca.”

“What? While he’s hacking himself up? No way!”

“Alright, alright! Go and talk to Mia, we’ll need her sniper rifle. Del will stay with Arca,” he says turning to his creation. “Make sure he doesn’t cut anything off that won’t grow back.”

Acknowledged.

“You’re joining the military?” asks Drej to Rennin.

“Long story,” the watchman shrugs.

Drej looks at Caufmann. “How will we contact him?”

“Let me worry about that,” says Caufmann.

Drej picks up the knife made of his own bone and hands it to Rennin who doesn’t make a move to take it. “If you carry this, I’ll be able to track you.”

Rennin’s eyes are fixed on the knife. “Um… look, pal, carrying parts of someone else might make a good trophy but that thing looks like it’s alive.”

“Of course it’s alive, it’s part of me. I’ll need it back but wherever you go, I’ll be able to find you.”

Caufmann sighs, “It’s a good idea, really, it will make it easier for the group to come get you.”

Rennin takes the knife carefully. “Can you feel me holding it?”

Drej’s gaze turns distant. “No, but I can feel where the knife is,

sort of like being unconsciously aware of where my hands and feet are when I'm not looking at them."

Rennin nods then looks to Caufmann. "You should get your wounds sorted out, I'm not sure if I'm willing to date you while you're bleeding everywhere."

Caufmann nods, "Once I sequester that gunship."

10.
The Roads Run Red

Rennin is standing at attention in a warehouse converted for military purposes, while they prepare to make an incursion into several of the most affected areas. He has been newly attired in the black fatigues of the Horizon Military. Offsetting the matte black uniform is a dark grey armour chest plate, pauldrons, back plate, leg guards and arm guards. He feels like a walking cliché. This uniform is the absolute epitome of the first scene in homoerotic pornography to Rennin's jaded mind.

Some of my favourites start like this.

His father used to say: 'A man can mud-stab all he wants in my book, because it'll keep him off your sister and your wife.' Rennin unwittingly smiles at the memory of his less than subtle father, unfortunately drawing the attention of the loudmouthed full-patriot shouting his brick-brained motivational abuse at the hundreds of assembled recruits.

"Did I say something funny, Fuckface?" the officer yells up at Rennin from more than a foot below his face.

The former watchman looks to him with the kind of disdain one would if they found a gigantic cow pat where their breakfast should be. Rennin is in his forties, he doesn't get spoken to like that by anyone.

Little prick.

"I've seen this episode before. It was on twenty years ago when I first joined up, do you mind if I fast forward?" he asks, getting a slight giggle from several of the others in earshot.

The angry leprechaun's face turns red. "You think you're *that* slick?"

Rennin shrugs, "Just point me in the direction that needs the bullets and get the hell out of my way."

"Don't you make me break your head off to shit down your neck!" mister small-man-syndrome attempts to yell at Rennin's neck, his redness only increasing from tomato to beetroot as Rennin parrots his mouth movements in perfect unison to this threat.

"I'm telling you, I've seen this episode."

The officer lands a sudden blow to Rennin's gut that almost doubles him over. "How do you feel about doing fifty?"

Did I just sidestep to 1975?

Rennin straightens up and sucks in a quick breath of air. "Alright, you lie down, relax, and I'll climb aboard. If I take longer than fifty

thrusts, I owe you a coke."

Pocket-rocket throws a vicious punch that connects sharply with Rennin's cheek, nearly knocking him out. He manages only to stumble, groggily holding himself upright. His vision begins clearing and he sees the officer, or whatever he is, walking calmly away.

Things are really falling apart if fists are already flying.

He expected to be struck again, or shouted at or something. Rennin watches closely as the stars fade and remembers that his bones are now Thermosteel and that the screaming Galah must have shattered his own hand against his face. The punch still stings like hell though. Rennin believes he must be saving face by leaving gracefully, going to a storeroom and having a good solid cry alone.

The next officer to address the recruits is more polite, though still full of the same dribbling garbage as the former.

Rennin inwardly chides himself for being so undisciplined in front of younger recruits. The rest of these impressionable untalented rectal swabs would probably just follow the leader, and since his Sergeant status has been reinstated they'll be looking to him for guidance. He may have heard all this crap before but the newer guys need a little cold hard boot put into them, it gives them the necessary fall back to brace their resolve. Rennin always saw it as hiding guilt behind purposeful ignorance or shrouding one's own uselessness behind blind obedience. *Heil Britannia*!

Despite his seemingly overbearing good humour, and abundant disregard for authority, his attitude is symptomatic of his severe unease. He hasn't heard anything from Caufmann or the others to let him know when they're coming to get him and he *really* doesn't want to be stuck with the rest of the grunts when they get sent into battle. Rennin shudders, thinking how these kids will react when the contaminant rushing at them is someone they know.

It isn't long before they all receive their standard issue gauntlets, allowing them easy access to all the data they'll need for where they're assigned, their unit and where they'll be deployed. Rennin flips his on, and reads over his assignment. His heart sinks when he reads:

Unit: Nova

Position: Point/Sniper Cover

Call-sign: Longinus

Deployment Zone: Centre-city Stadium.

Current Objective: Immune personnel en route to fortified Whitechapel District. Protect at all costs.

Report to Gunship: Dead Star.

Rennin takes a deep breath. He decides that it's best to meet these rejects as soon as possible to assess the exact odds that they'll explode ten minutes after take off.

He passes more troops, on the receiving end of their uplifting lectures from their respective leaders, all the while trying to ignore Arca Drej's knife sheathed across his right shoulder. It vibrates momentarily from time to time. The sensation really does make Rennin's skin crawl.

He sees the gunship, with what was once an emblem of a supernova splayed across one side of its nose. Someone has painted over it with an image of the iconic Death Star. Rennin can't help but laugh bitterly at such a colossal mistake.

George Lucas is rolling in his grave.

There are over a hundred gunships in total by the look of it but he isn't sure how many will actually be flying. The power grid is still down, too. He gets to the gunship and the commanding officer salutes him, causing Rennin to metaphysically vomit. He raises his hand to his brow loosely. "Rennin Farrow reporting, your highness."

The stocky lieutenant looks up at him with pale brown eyes, "*My* highness?"

"I assume you're Princess Leia, leader of this unit?"

The lieutenant's face looks like it just aged twenty years before looking to the emblem on the gunship. "Oh that. We didn't think it would do any harm to let the men have a little fun. Plus I'm sort of being punished," he says looking past Rennin and smiling at an officer several gunship berths away that looks like a total prick.

"For what?"

"He found out it was me that filled his boots with Loctite. Took a laser-scalpel to remove the bastards."

Rennin can't help but smirk. "I think if I did that to my boss, he'd be cutting *me* up with the scalpel."

Recognition flashes across the lieutenant's face. "Ah, you're the Godyssey guy from the lab."

"You've read my file?"

"Well, yeah, that, and you're the one who was wounded the night of the Aurelia Rally, right?"

"How'd you know that?"

"Mate, stories get passed around like the town bike here. I heard you lost both your legs and half your face from one guy, another told me the thing tried to violate you with its cast iron rod, another one was it took your guts out and tried strangling you with your own intestine, and some idiot tried starting a conspiracy that *you* were the android all along."

Rennin shakes his head, "And I thought you army boys weren't creative."

"Yeah well, I knew you were a veteran from your file and the rest I just ignored. Good to have you here, actually. What's your call-sign

by the way?"

"Longinus."

The lieutenant smirks. "Messiah Stabber, eh? Well I'm Lieutenant Sabre, our heavy gunner is Jawa, our spotter is Obie, vehicle specialist is Clank, corporal is Fader, Pilot Bulldog and our four grunts are Ruin, Ghost, Oxy and Boron."

"I thought teams known with call-signs are supposed to follow a theme. Like we're gunship Dead Star. We can all be dead stars. You could be MJ himself, I'll be Judy Garland, that guy could be Marilyn Monroe—"

"Nothing's perfect," says Sabre with a small laugh.

Rennin looks again to the crude drawing of the Death Star next to the name Dead Star. "I see that."

"Well one of the gunships is called Barbie so it's not all bad," Sabre says.

"Point taken. Got in trouble for something to do with barbeques?"

"No, fucking in the shower."

"Lovely."

"All the gunship crews have call-signs but mostly it's pretty normal stuff."

"Not referring to us as numbers anymore?" asks Rennin.

"Regular troops are still numbers. Hell we're *all* still numbers, but gunship crews get call-signs. Something about differentiating between the meat that gets slow cooked and the stuff thrown in the grinder."

"Big word for a lieutenant. What's your actual name?"

He shrugs, "Best stick with Sabre, I don't want anyone getting confused. We'll all be referred to by our call-sign in the field."

"Wonderful."

"Alright, we're all scheduled to depart in fifteen minutes so grab your ammo and get yourself ready."

"From where?"

"There's caches everywhere with ammunition, just look for the soldiers surrounding crates like packs of seagulls and get what you need. Grenades are at the far back wall, though," he says pointing further down the warehouse.

Rennin moves to the nearest ammo crates that contain pistol, pulse rifle and sniper rounds. The heavy gunner from Gunship Dead Star, Jawa, is over at another crate stocking up on his special type ammunition.

Rennin pushes between several soldiers and grabs the standard two magazines for his pistol and pulse rifle, putting them in his ammunition harness attached to his armour plating. He's about to walk off when something occurs to him. He's seen almost every zombie movie ever made, played every survival horror videogame and

they all have one thing in common: never enough bullets. He digs back into the crate and shoves every pocket he can full of sniper, pistol and rifle rounds. When he's satisfied his ammunition belts and pockets literally cannot hold any more, he half waddles off towards the grenade crates at the far end of the warehouse.

It's heavy, he notes, *but I'm not going to run out of bullets. No way*.

Arriving at the grenade crates, he clips several to the remaining free places on his webbing. A soldier next to him asks facetiously if he has enough ammunition because he won't have room for water or rations. Rennin states the he'd rather die fighting, not eating.

Rennin focuses back to the explosives before him. Yet again he mentally chides himself for being a poor example. Then he realises that the soldier was a private mouthing off to a Sergeant, and so he feels better about the mild dressing down.

He moves to head back to the gunship when he spots a case full of NAPA bombs, behind an armoured cage. He literally feels his mouth water. He takes his dog tags out and runs the barcode across the lock scanner. It clicks open, probably since he's an officer.

There is a god!

He drops three pouches of ammunition to fit the grenades into his harness then shuts the cage again. Even with losing those several magazines he's still absolutely packed to the rafters.

Not long after he gets back to the gunship, the sirens go off and all crews head to their assigned squads. Rennin and the others of Nova unit pile into Dead Star and await further instruction.

Sabre stands up, waiting for his strike team to put their helmets on as the Dead Star gunship lifts off the ground with a pulse of energy.

Full deployment commences. All gunships fly out of the warehouse towards their assigned zones. Rennin looks out the left viewport at Raddocks Horizon. Random emergency lights from buildings and moonlight breaking through the clouds are all he can see on the surface. He doesn't like the idea of being deployed in the dark, but there's no knowing what the streets will be teeming with if they wait until morning.

The engines of the gunship roar inside the cabin, and he has brief images of the infamous drop through the atmosphere when the Possession went down in flames. But when he looks around the gunship at the others, all seated in rows back to back, he can't help but remember his first deployment in a gunship to Hong Kong during the first major campaign of the CryoZaiyon War that would see an entire year swallowed in one single battle that raged across the solar system.

The cityscape provides a bleak background for the lieutenant, who stands in battle dress with one arm gripping a handle that drapes

from the ceiling as the ship shakily shifts direction to avoid a building. Everything tilts sideways. Sabre starts talking loudly trying to be heard over the engines.

"We're going to be dropped in hot zones where there are intense concentrations of infection. Raston Squad are holding the Stadium, which is our last line of defence, we can't let them push us back further than that. We'll be dropped half a klick from there. The bastards go where the meat is. They seem to be infecting or killing anyone they find.

"The LZ is entirely hostile, the ground troops have set up a perimeter in the surrounding area to keep the contaminants trapped. The gunships will then hit specific buildings, to prevent them spreading. After the gunships have cleared the main buildings we will be dropped on the ground to mop up the mess and will be reinforced with standard infantry. Remember to stay sharp and do *not* respond to calls for help, we know these fuckers lay traps and we *cannot* afford to lose soldiers that way.

"Anything you see in this zone is classed as hostile and you *must* shoot it. They're not people anymore. Some of you might even recognise the faces you have to kill. It's an inconceivable thing to think about, I know, but it's not them anymore, it's a parasite using the body as a puppet. Get yourselves mentally ready, there's only three minutes until we open fire."

Rennin looks closely out the viewport as Dead Star banks in an arc towards their designated attack zone. The local area is already smoking with several spot fires from various buildings. From that distance he can't see any contaminants moving around.

A voice comes over their helmet communicators of the attack coordinates and Dead Star straightens up towards a nearby building that looks like an apartment complex. Due to the blackout and satellite problems they've been restricted to line of sight shooting since guidance systems and missile tracking are completely useless.

Dead Star fires a barrage of regular shells through the base floors of the building, then unloads four missiles that hit the ground floor, erupting in plumes of fire. The overall structure doesn't simply collapse in on itself as the old buildings did, it remains upright but the floors above can be seen falling inwards. The superstructure of modern buildings can withstand anything up to an orbital strike.

Another building goes up in flames to Dead Star's left, and Rennin looks over to see another gunship firing missiles and shells. Rennin feels a small glimmer of hope that they may actually succeed in this insane mission.

You wish, shit tits.

Sabre looks at the destruction for a moment before turning back

to the crew. “Gunships Horus and Genome will be taking offensive positions at the west and north of our target zone,” he shouts, with more explosions in the background strong enough to cause a little turbulence. “This is done by the book. Don’t get separated, don’t respond to calls for help and for the love of *God* no wanking on mission.” The crew of Nova Unit do at least have a brief laugh at that, mere moments before the lights in the interior go red, meaning their deployment into the field is imminent.

Amid a smoky street with burning buildings all around, Dead Star sets down releasing the troops out the rear ramp. Several military minds have been locked in arguments that deploying from a rear ramp instead of out either side of the vehicle is a tactical flaw, since it bottlenecks the crew and a well-placed rocket would kill everyone aboard and more than likely take out the craft. The other viewpoint is that since the gunships are heavily armoured at the front, it is perfect. The crew can exit the craft using the gunship itself as cover whilst the vehicle maintains covering fire. Dead Star is newer and is equipped with sliding armoured doors at either side but they’re not used while the tactical debate continues. Rennin inwardly vomits.

We’re not under fire. Contaminants probably don’t even know what fire is. Standard procedures don’t apply.

Rennin is teamed with Obie, his target spotter, and they hold back to one side of the transport while the others spread out to their assigned fire teams. No contact.

Jawa takes a cover position just outside the craft with his heavy gun. Rennin assumes the name ‘Jawa’ being applied to this mammoth of a man is just someone’s idea of a joke.

Rennin wistfully glances at Dead Star, trying to hide the hunger in his eyes. Obie, Jawa, the pilot Bulldog and Sabre are all that stand between Rennin and his ticket to freedom. He thinks he could take them all out, but at least one of them would be able to raise the alarm. He’d have to do this quietly with Obie and Jawa. Once inside the gunship he can shoot Bulldog and Sabre in their military faces and be free. Free and on his way to Carla, he thinks while looking at his ring finger where the marital barcode can just be seen poking out from under his fingerless gloves.

Combat hasn’t started yet, so they shouldn’t be too on edge. Without the adrenaline that he can feel flooding his system he has the upper hand. Obie is a weed, easy to remove from the equation. Jawa is the biggest immediate threat but he is also carrying the heaviest weapon, which will slow him down. Rennin isn’t as quick as he once was but decisive action tends to negate that. Most people aren’t willing killers.

Sabre and Bulldog are the furthest away, therefore the most

dangerous. Closing any distance between a ranged enemy is suicide if they know you're coming. Bulldog should still be strapped in the pilot's chair. Sabre won't be expecting an attack from here. All Rennin needs is to be quick, quiet, and act with conviction.

He lets his rifle hang off his shoulder as he turns to face Obie with a murderous glare. The young soldier looks at him and when Rennin sees his eyes, something in him freezes. This kid is eighteen years old at maximum, but could even be younger if he underwent accelerated hormonal therapy to advance his physical age. It's not unheard of in this era when a young man wants to escape his childhood as fast as possible. Either way, there is no hiding the fact that Rennin is looking into the eyes of little more than a child.

He can't do it. He turns back to the streets.

For some inexplicable reason he begins thinking of the Beatles.

As a child they were his favourite band because they made everything survivable. Even nowadays, during his most disgraceful alcoholic binges he'd have police over in the wee hours of the morning, ordering him to turn down their blaring catalogue. Perhaps he's starting to make peace with his lot here in his own bizarre way. Maybe he's not meant to get out at all.

A fierce frown creases his face. The last thing he gave to the person he loves most in the world is a punch to the face, and he'll be damned if that's the last thing she remembers of him.

He's getting out and that's all there is to it, but he's not going to kill his own men to do it. Being stuck with this unit is just a little delay.

"You better believe it," he whispers under his breath. *I want to hold your hand.*

He's still in the middle of reproaching himself when Sabre's voice comes over their headsets. "Longinus, you and Obie can board Dead Star. Fader's team has secured a sniper zone. Jawa will provide support in case of any surprises."

Rennin slaps his spotter's pauldron.

"Ready, kid?" Obie nods and Rennin leads him into Dead Star, where they take their seats with Jawa. "Where are you from?"

"Middle-city, Hotham Glen," Obie answers sheepishly.

"Rich area. How about you, Jaws?"

"Rather 'Jaws' than fucking 'Jawa.' Samoa is my home."

"I'm from a distant crater too, but I meant locally," says Rennin.

"I'm from Whitechapel," says the giant.

"Well at least you live in the fortified zone."

"Yeah. Great. All property in the area is seized for government use and the refugees."

Rennin finds himself laughing. "Hell of a thing having refugees

from your own city *in* your own city."

"If anything's missing, someone's going to die," says Jawa tapping his gun.

"Yeah I feel that way about my porn collection too."

That gets a ripple of laughter, even from Sabre. Obie looks over at Rennin. "Did you really fight a progenitor-class barehanded?"

Rennin bursts out laughing. "Yep… and I masturbate with clamps and a cheese grater."

That gets a huffing chuckle out of Jawa. "That's how hard you are, Longinus?"

"What makes me hard is shitting spare gunship parts," he says, realising he doesn't hate soldiers as much as he thought. It's not their fault they're being used. In letting that sink in he feels the anger towards all things military recede a little, and with it fades some the resentment he feels towards himself.

Again he thinks of Carla and his resolve stiffens. Normally he'd cackle at the not-so-cunning euphemism but in this rare instance he's being quite literal.

She loves you yeah, yeah, yeah.

Dead Star lowers onto the roof of their target building. Rennin, Jawa and Obie hurry out over to an appropriate corner, that overlooks the main road leading to the stadium that looms in the distance like a shadowy crown. Rennin rests his rifle on the ledge and trains his scope around. No contact. He looks to the stadium to the right of him.

Nothing.

He focuses in front of him, to an intersection providing little cover. Any stray contaminants won't stand much chance. A nasal voice comes over their audio channel. "Fader here, we're currently across the street from your position, Longinus, don't open fire."

"You think the guy sniping is too blind to tell what's what?" asks Rennin.

"Cut it out, Longinus," says Sabre.

"Do you have to call me that? One wrong slip and it might become Long Anus. My nipples are so hard," says Rennin getting a barely contained laughing fit from Jawa.

"Keep silent and keep your answers professional."

"Silent *and* professional?" asks Rennin noticing Jawa has a hand clamped over his own mouth.

"Longinus—"

"I'm sorry, sir, I'm just trying to keep some humour up, you said we'll be shooting people we might know. Isn't it worth it to have a laugh while we can, sir?"

There's a pause. "Acknowledged. But that's enough."

A click is heard and they're back to talking amongst themselves.

“So who wants to steal the gunship?” Rennin asks, training his scope on it.

“Yeah I wouldn’t mind, but we’d be taken out by the Skyhook,” says Jawa.

Rennin forgot about that. *Lucky*. Rennin trains his scope across the buildings looking at the various readings that flash in the scope to the left of his sight. “The scanner in my sniper scope is picking up a lot of something called Substance 6, what is that?”

“I don’t know,” says Jawa.

“Me neither,” says Obie.

Rennin shrugs. “It’s finding almost as much of it as the bio-signs of people. According to the scope, the data scans are being sent to Iyatoya. *That* I find odd.”

“Why?” asks Jawa.

“Isn’t the city supposed to be completely contained?”

“Contact!” calls Obie drawing Rennin’s concentration back to the job. “East of the intersection.”

Rennin zooms in to the fearful expression of the contaminant. He can just make out the black veins on its neck. The thing starts calling for help. Rennin’s eyes turn to ice.

“Screamer.” A single shot rings out, making Obie jump. The contaminant’s head flies apart. Rennin curses loudly and pulls the rifle back. “Forgot the goddamned silencer,” he whispers harshly while screwing it on.

You’re a bit rusty, old thing.

“Longinus, what the hell was that?” comes Sabre’s voice.

“Yeah I know, I just broadcasted my position across the Solarnet. I’ll tell the flocking masses you say hi.”

Rennin, Obie and Jawa remain still as stone, all clenching their teeth waiting for something to happen, but the streets remain quiet.

“Don’t silencers reduce accuracy?” asks Jawa.

Rennin looks at him with a cross between pity and disbelief, “From *this* distance? Two hundred years ago, maybe.”

“Maybe no one’s about,” ventures Obie.

“The one I shot was a Screamer, there’ll be more nearby,” says Rennin. He keeps his sights around the body, looking for any sign of movement. Soon enough he sees a soldier walking across the street at a ducked sprint towards the body. “Oh no. Fader, you copy?”

“Here, Longinus.”

“Who’s that daft prick checking the body I just shot?”

“I don’t know, what colour are his pauldrons?”

“Yellow.”

“Horus Unit.”

The soldier is now stationary at the body with a hand to his

helmet obviously radioing in the kill. “Channel?” asks Rennin.

“Ninety-eight point six.”

Rennin switches to that channel. “Trooper by the sniper kill, you copy?”

“Identify.”

“Nova Unit Sniper, get yourself back to your unit double time—”

“Oh my god,” says Obie.

Rennin looks back through his scope and sees a swarm of contaminants rushing out of the building. “Run, trooper!”

Rennin focuses on a target and fires a round through its chest killing it instantly. The trooper is scrambling away from a handful of contaminants that are almost on him. Rennin pulls the bolt action back ejecting the empty shell, slides it back and takes another shot, another kill. He ejects another shell, another shot, another kill but there are more piling out of the building.

“Too many,” Rennin says pulling off the bolt mechanism, attaching an assault rifle automatic upper receiver and slamming a full magazine into the underside, all the while staring at the crowd that’s ever growing.

“Sacrificing accuracy for volume, ready to fire,” he says.

Rennin pours out shot after shot, each hitting but not all outright kills. He always hated magazine-fed sniper rifles because they never shoot as straight as the old bolt-action mechanisms, particularly with high calibre rounds.

He takes out one that dives atop the soldier. Bullets are flying out from the other side of the street in a barrage but it’s not stopping the rampaging contaminants. Rennin stops shooting, just watching the sea of bodies running at the gunmen with an increasing amount of ‘Substance 6’ on the scope display.

“What are you doing? Help them!” says Obie. The soldier investigating the original kill has been overrun and can’t even be seen anymore.

The contaminants make it across the street and screams can be heard along with gunfire, but at the sound of tearing flesh and death cries Rennin switches channels back to his own unit,

“Fader, you copy?”

“Longinus! I’ve been trying to reach you!” it is Sabre’s voice.

“I tried to warn the troops on the street but they’re gone,” Rennin says.

“Fader’s dead! The whole unit is gone. Only one from Clone Unit made it back to the gunship.”

Rennin can’t get his head around how fast that just happened. “Orders?”

“A pack of them just ran into the building you’re in—”

Rennin trains his scope to the streets and can see a group back where Horus Unit was taken out all looking towards him with their white eyes. "*Jesus*, I *hate* these things," he says ducking down.

"—they'll be at your position in moments. Hold them off till Dead Star arrives," orders Sabre before signing off.

"You heard him. We have to keep the rooftop clear, they *won't* land if we're overrun," says Rennin. The three of them keep their backs to the ledge and point their guns towards the roof access. Rennin switches to his assault rifle for the closer quarter combat.

Blood droplets strike Rennin's face seemingly from nowhere. He looks to Obie who has a look of horror on his face, with a huge sword-like claw protruding through his chest. Then he's gone, pulled over the edge.

Rennin pushes Jawa away from the ledge. "They can climb walls!" he yells, inwardly cursing himself for letting that slip his mind. He should have remembered from his first encounter with the contaminants out the front of the lab.

"Here they come!" calls Jawa, opening fire on the flood of them at the doorway.

Rennin pulls the trigger and nothing happens. He curses, describing a certain mother's gratuitous fornication with sailors.

"Safety catch, man!"

"Where the fuck is it?" he looks desperately at the side of the gun.

"Other side! Other side!"

Rennin flips the gun over to see the safety catch as plainly as his own ineptitude. He should have known that. It is then he realises he's holding the gun in his offhand. *When did I become left-handed?*

He arms the gun just in time for one to leap over the ledge onto the rooftop. Rennin cries out, firing off-balance causing him to fall over. He lets out a yell, willing himself to steady his aim, blasting the thing in the head and the chest but the bullets just don't look like they're penetrating. The creature is badly maimed and stumbles back over the ledge, to its death. "Something's wrong, Jawa, how weak are these bullets?"

"They're Nexus Arms, should shoot through a tank. These things are strong." he calls chewing through bullets and mutants alike.

Rennin faces the ledge where others can be heard climbing and snarling. "You right there?"

"For the moment. We've got them bottlenecked at the doorway."

"I'll cover you," yells Rennin, shooting any clawed hands he sees gripping the top of the ledge. Insanely, it reminds him of a game he played as a child where you have a hammer and have to hit the alligator heads that pop out of the cave.

"Loading!" calls Jawa.

Fuck! Jawa's gun needs to have its empty ammo box removed, another refit and the bullet belt placed correctly in the feed tray. It could take twenty seconds to load, maybe more if he fumbles. Rennin swings his weapon around to start firing at the doorway where they storm up one after the other. He hammers one in the head with what must have been ten rounds but it only drops dead when a bullet pierces its eye. He aims lower, tearing through their abdomens, feeling rapture swell within him like a heavenly wave as they collapse from the sheer grievousness of their wounds.

"That's right, *die*!" he yells swinging back to the ledge to shoot off a few more clutching hands, and even a face.

"Ready," calls Jawa climbing to his feet, commencing fire on the doorway.

"Aim for the stomach. If we can't take them down cleanly we'll rip 'em apart!"

"Copy that," says Jawa and the two of them lay down everything they have standing back to back. Rennin picks off the clawing hands and Jawa blows the literal guts out of the ones charging out of the roof access. Red lights suddenly shine down from above. "The gunship."

Rennin knows gunship lights are blue, not red, and he risks glancing upwards. What he sees sends a chill running down his spine. He shoots a few more contaminants off the ledge and takes a longer look at the object above. "You're kidding…"

"What is it?" Jawa glances up. "What the *hell* is that?"

Above there's a round disc that looks like a slightly closed black flower, the petals are more like claws arcing downwards. At their crux is a glowing red light. "It's a Desolator satellite!" Rennin calls as the weapon begins charging, causing an updraft strong enough to lift the empty shell casings into the sky.

Dead Star arrives overhead a few seconds later. It blasts the roof access doorway stopping the flow of contaminants. Both Jawa and Rennin swear in happiness but now contaminants are leaping onto the rooftop from all around.

Dead Star settles low enough to board and Rennin yells for them to make a break for it. The two survivors run at the gunship through the now roaring upward wind. Sabre opens both doors on either side to provide some cover fire.

They make it to the gunship with Jawa slamming straight into it, unable to make the climb because of the weight of his weapon. Rennin leaps in cleanly despite his age and the weight of his extra ammo. He shoots a couple of contaminants then reaches down, grabbing Jawa's vest with his andronic right hand, bracing with his left leg and hoisting the surprised soldier in one handed.

Rennin turns to pilot Bulldog. “Get us out of—” he is cut off by a contaminant diving into the gunship and onto him, throwing his body against the pilot’s seat. A long claw growing out of its wrist is thrust at him. He dodges to the side and it pierces the pilot’s seat behind him. Bulldog cries out.

Fuck!

Rennin removes Drej’s knife, and slashes along its bowel with one smooth stroke. He digs his hand into the wound, grabbing anything he can, ripping it out causing the creature to screech and drop dead.

“Shut the doors!” he screams kicking the carcass out of the side exit. He gets to his feet, clambering desperately into the co-pilot’s seat next to Bulldog who’s clutching his pierced shoulder in shock. Sabre slams the button to close the doors and Dead Star is locked down. Rennin looks over the controls and prays they haven’t changed since his time in the CryoZaiyon War. He puts his hand on the throttle and looks up to see a contaminant standing, snarling at him from outside the cockpit. That face of hate spells one thing to him and makes his stomach flip: recognition. It knows him. The rockets blast and Dead Star makes a shaky escape from the rooftops.

As they lift off, Jawa looks out over the building, watching the contaminants swarm over it and the dust cloud from the ground being pulled towards the satellite. He then hurries to the cockpit to help Bulldog out of his chair and to the nearest seat to assess his injury.

Rennin looks at the empty seat next to him and the hole that’s been stabbed clean through. He winces then looks out to his left and can see a gunship flying alongside so he opens communications. “This is gunship Dead Star, hailing.”

“Copy, Dead Star, this is Gunship Genome.”

Genome is the Clone Unit gunship. “Survivors?”

“One.”

“Any sign of Horus Unit?”

“It was overrun while on the ground, never got off the surface.”

Sabre taps Rennin’s shoulder. “Desolator satellite is about to fire, so heads up.”

Although Dead Star is well out of the blast zone the satellite firing is heard and felt very clearly. The red light increases in intensity for a moment, then the impact from ground zero is felt as a fierce jolt in Rennin’s stomach, followed by a deafening roar and shockwave that jostles Dead Star a little.

Rennin cuts the gunship across to the right to get a look at the impact. Apart from some smoke, there’s no great hellfire that he expected from such a detonation. He’d always heard that Desolator satellites were green-friendly weapons but he never really believed there was such a thing. But here it was: scorched earth, ashen remains

but no fallout or collateral damage through fire. The block they fired on is completely obliterated and everything around is stable, if a little shaken up.

A call comes in over the cabin from HQ.

"Yes?" asks Rennin still overwhelmed with everything.

"What do you mean 'yes'? Identify yourself, soldier."

Rennin bites his lip hard enough to draw blood. "Gunship Dead Star, *sir*." *Come on, Caufmann, where are you?*

"I mean you personally, trooper."

"Sergeant Rennin Farrow, Call-sign: Longinus."

"This is Commander Jorge Croft, your unit is ordered to rendezvous with Raston Squad. They are holding Horizon Stadium. Their position is being overrun."

"How many? The Desolator must have fried thousands of the hostiles."

"There's a lot more of them, son."

Rennin looks back to Lieutenant Sabre for his orders. He shakes his head. "We lost a lot of our unit, our heavy gunner is out of ammo and our pilot is wounded, don't they have any support?"

"They're special forces son, they are the last line, defending the evacuees. They need assistance and you are it."

"Copy, changing heading to Horizon Stadium."

"Good man, I'll—" Rennin slams the communicator button, cutting off the commander. Rennin swings Dead Star around and Gunship Genome does the same, obviously receiving the same orders. Rennin can't help but feel real pity for the last survivor of Clone Unit. Rennin was thrown back into combat after Indigo Reign without fully recovering mentally, and it was bad, but being put straight into combat the minute after your whole team dies around you is disastrous. It must be getting very desperate already. The combat has hit hard and fast, if Rennin is still reeling from it there's a good chance many others are too.

"Longinus, the drop zone is outside the West Gate," says Sabre, assessing his forearm display.

"Why not land *in* it from above?"

"There are transports evacuating the uninfected to Whitechapel, coming and going through the roof access."

Rennin scoffs and shakes his head. "Idiots."

"You let us off and provide cover-fire from the air."

"What about Bulldog?"

"We'll take him inside and he can get an airlift to Whitechapel for treatment."

A minute later they are approaching Horizon Stadium. Rennin shrugs, figuring that at least their landing zone should be clear of

contaminants for the time being, thanks to the Desolator. The blast zone is precise with the edge of it mere metres from the stadium itself.

Rennin brings Dead Star in and settles it down just outside the West Gate. Sabre and Jawa pick up Bulldog and support him between them. “Be our eye in the sky, Longinus,” Sabre says, grinning before his face turns serious. “Provide air support should any packs of the bastards come at us from the streets.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Once the uninfected are safely out of the stadium, come in and pick us up, it’s going to get very nasty in here soon.”

“They go where the meat is, I know,” nods Rennin.

“Good luck.” says Sabre as he and Jawa take Bulldog out of Gunship Dead Star and meet up with the survivor of Clone Unit. He walks towards them, seemingly in a daze, without even shouldering his rifle. Rennin thinks he must be really messed up after losing his unit, as he engages the door lock.

Too bad.

With that, Rennin takes off and abandons them.

11.
The Voice That Killed a City

Sindaris Tessol turned seventy-six years old three months ago. He was once a construction worker and Foreman of the building team that erected the Mega Hall forty years ago. He'd lived in the Sanctuary Ravine Retirement Village for just under fifteen years. He had no family he cared to remember, and very few living friends. His looks had never bothered him nor had the slow decrepitude affecting his aging body. At least not until now. The face staring back at him in the abandoned motel bathroom can't be older than twenty-five. He has aged backwards half a century in a fourteen days.

Sindaris discovered he was infected several weeks previous to his age reversal. He was content to sit at home and wait for the rumoured hit squads, or to die from the virus. Now the black veins around his arms, neck and the sides of his face pulse angrily but his facial ones are far less noticeable. He shakes his head unable to understand his predicament.

A fortnight ago he felt himself die. He felt everything fade and even when his heartbeat failed. He felt a sense of relief, of release. Several hours later he suddenly woke up. At first he was disoriented, thinking everything was a dream, but when he saw his eyes he knew there was something very wrong.

Where he once had blue eyes, magenta irises now stare back at him, with pupils that have split into binary vertical slits. Now he can see clearly in the dark and far into the ultraviolet spectrum, and his peripheral vision has sharpened to perfect focus.

He stands in room 002 of the Bright Horizon Motel, central to the Middle-city District, checking over his face carefully with his alien eyes, looking for any hint of further change. It appears the reverse aging has stopped. Though now another abnormality has surfaced. Sindaris hasn't grown in size but he weighs almost an extra thirty kilograms. However, those details pale in comparison to what is happening inside his head.

About two days after coming back from the dead he began hearing voices, but more accurately he began thinking them as if they were his own inner monologue. He could hear others in his head that were infected.

The more people that become infected, the more voices there are, and the number of new voices is increasing almost by the minute.

Sindaris is terrified to sleep because when he closes his eyes he sees things, abhorrent things. He has already watched them eat, seeing

through their eyes. He has watched them lay traps with the ones the military calls 'Screamers,' watched them infect their own families. At first it was visual only; now he can *feel* what they do, taste who they eat, feel their fears, and when they become hungry so does Sindaris.

Something is different with him, compared to the other infected. He feels all the things the masses of infected feel but does not, at any point, hunger for human or animal meat as they do. Sindaris has been eating out of cans, though his appetite has increased dramatically. Another thing he's noticed is that the infected become less and less intelligent the longer they exist after they reanimate. Their minds degenerate into something more animalistic and stupid. No such mental decline is happening to Sindaris and the others can sense it. He is not like them and they are being directed to hunt him down.

They call for him in feverish masses, babbling his name.

Sindaris has to hide wherever he can, and has learned to move around without looking at landmarks or street signs; he's sure they can see through his eyes as he can see through theirs. He can think about where he wants to go because his more complex thoughts are hidden from what he thinks of as the 'Sharemind,' but basic impulses like his desire to flee are not. His best hope is to lay low as long as possible until the contaminants are too witless to track him. But whatever is directing them isn't one of them, Sindaris can sense it. And it is certainly not stupid.

He feels the tell tale scratching in his ears like someone is tickling his ear hair with a toothpick. Sindaris knows the controlling entity is about to speak into his mind and he wonders if it's going to say anything new or just repeat the same threats of dismemberment it has been mumbling since it discovered his existence.

It speaks with its genderless voice. It sounds like it has a thick layer of some awful substance lining the back of its throat creating a slight bubbling affect, causing a distortion in the sound. "Where are you now, Tessol?"

Sindaris curses. He'd run across a contaminant several days ago and they'd seen his face. What one sees the masses do. One of the contaminants in the hive, or whatever it is, must have recognised him and so now they all know him despite his youthful appearance. *Damn it.*

"I don't know," he answers, "therefore, neither do you."

"We will find you."

"So do it and be silent," says Sindaris aloud, despite the voice being inaudible to all but himself. He has to speak because when he thinks the answer the entity can't seem to acknowledge it. Which means he can swear at it all he likes mentally and it'll never know.

The voice remains silent for a time leaving Sindaris staring at his

own mutated eyes in the mirror but the scratching sensation in his ears remains. It's still listening. But, predictably, it speaks again. "Give yourself up. It will be painless."

Sindaris scoffs, "For you or for me?"

"Where are you going to go? The military will execute you on sight and you've outlived everyone who ever cared enough to help you."

Sindaris feels a pang of grief as he thinks of his dead wife. They were married just under the half a century that Sindaris has physically lost and she died seven years ago. The surge of grief is felt as strongly as it was the day she died. Crisp, clean and hopelessly overpowering. Though he finds some comfort in it, it means he's still human. Sindaris is about to retort but the scratching sensation is gone. He is alone again.

Sindaris' thoughts are then drawn to what he's going to do but he knows that dwelling on it might reveal his desperation. Moods are picked up on quickly and cleanly by nearby contaminants, so he attempts to remain detached from every situation.

His heart skips a beat as he realises that the entity may have been trying to provoke his grief so nearby contaminants would pick up on it. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. The infected closest to him will be able to sense his distress the most, painting a metaphysical bullseye to his location through each of their interconnected consciousness. It would also explain why the entity just stopped talking to him. His half-panicked pondering is answered when he hears his name called across the silent streets nearby. He tries in vain to suppress a rush of terror that envelops him as a winter wind would a naked body.

He bolts out of his hotel room and into the temporarily empty motel courtyard and sprints off in a random direction into the night, focussing his panic into an image of the Mega Hall as a symbol of his salvation but running in what he hopes is the opposite direction. He doesn't know where he's going, he just runs, and runs, and runs.

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Rennin has taken Dead Star several blocks away then straight up. Now he is sitting in the clouds, paralysed by his decision. Leaving his unit to fend for themselves is little different from just shooting them himself. He has only been serving with them for a day but it makes no difference.

He thinks back to the soldiers on the street who were overwhelmed by the contaminants. Can he really do it? Can he really

follow through and desert? He wrestles with it while staring at his reflection in the glass in front of him. Where would he be now if Lieutenant Veidan abandoned *him* when the Possession went down? That android, his friend, dove aflame through the atmosphere on the back of a Wolf-droid to save that pod, and was exposed to Indigo Reign as a result. Rennin still hears Veidan screaming when he tries to sleep some nights. No amount of alcohol will ever erase the memory of the purity of pain produced through android larynx.

Rennin grunts and slams his face into a clear space on the control panel. He feels a trickle of blood run out of his nose but doesn't bother to see to it. He sits up again, looking to his reflection with a grim face. "I earned it! Haven't I lost enough?" he yells, hitting the throttle.

Dead Star is propelled into motion but after barely two seconds he slams the reverse thrusters and is stationary again looking at his own reflection fiercely. Would he ever be able to look at that face again? He feels like his hand is back on the purge switch in the Possession's escape pod rather than Dead Star's throttle.

Ready to kill more just to save yourself?

Morally speaking it was just blind luck their steep re-entry had caused the jettison mechanism to melt and malfunction, otherwise he would have killed those four troops himself. It is irrelevant that they died later because he couldn't have known that would happen. Though if he did purge those other survivors Jolen wouldn't have died his friend, wouldn't have entrusted to him that letter he wrote to his loved ones in the minutes prior to the devastating effects of Indigo Reign really kicking in.

He looks away from his reflection unable to bear his own appearance any longer. His hand grips tightly to the throttle but it still feels like the purge switch in his hand. He grits his teeth so hard that they probably would crack if they weren't Thermosteel. What would Jolen say if he lived through Decora's treatment and Rennin had died instead? At that point, the last act Rennin attempted to kill four of their own men to save himself. He can hear Jolen's voice at the back of his mind, speaking with a subtle derision that he had when brandishing a wry smile. "Pussy."

"Fuck you, Jolen! No! I'm *not* dying here!" he screeches slumping forwards. "God damn you," he whispers, then thinks of Carla. "Why did you give me something worth losing?" He isn't sure who 'you' is, but someone's responsible for this poetic justice.

Jolen's parents and he hadn't spoken for the five years leading up to his death. Rennin never met them, but he hated them then, and still does now. He'd cross the street to spit on them if he saw them. The cruel things Rennin says in jest, those people meant literally. Jolen was a gentle man, a truly beautiful soul. They rejected their son

because of his sexual orientation. Rennin can't believe there are still people who quibble over such things.

Rennin begged his sergeant to be the one to deliver the news and the flag to Jolen's parents. Of course he didn't go. He left the condolence letter in their mailbox and took the flag to Jolen's husband. That was the hardest thing Rennin has ever done. He hadn't dealt with the death of his best friend until he had to tell Jolen's widower. The expression on Raymond Jolen's face when he delivered the news reflected the grievous wound that Rennin was trying to hide. He couldn't hold it in any longer. He hadn't cried since his family died.

He finds himself almost gasping for air briefly as a tear rolls down his face. "I miss you so much, man, you fucking arsehole."

He feels Drej's knife vibrate again and the sensation shivers him upright. He's suddenly aware of the calls for help coming through the radio from all over Raddocks Horizon. Judging from the torrent of chatter it would appear that every single unit is under siege.

He glances at the throttle but can't will himself to move at the moment. When Sabre and Jawa took Bulldog out and he realised he was alone he just fled without thinking about it. Perhaps it was some kind of despicable reflex, he isn't sure. He's on the verge of falling into a new inward conflict when another call for help comes over the radio. "Is anyone in East Fortescue? I need retrieval! My unit is gone and I'm pinned down on a rooftop," the soldier calls over the sound of shooting in controlled bursts. "I'm letting off a green flare!"

Fortescue centre is half a kilometre from Rennin's current location. "Ah, Jesus," he says wiping the bloodied drips falling off his nose with the back of his hand.

"Can anyone see it?" his voice is getting desperate. No one has answered him. His shots are more random already.

Rennin sits rocking slightly in his seat for several painstaking seconds. They feel more like hours. His inner turmoil only gets worse when he looks downwards from the cockpit and can see the flare burning with his own eyes. "Oh come on!" he says looking back at his reflection.

"I'm atop the old recording studio, there's dozens of them! Lighting another flare!"

Rennin looks down again wincing as he watches the green light glow brighter. He didn't have to light a second one, the first is still burning brightly. The soldier is panicking. Rennin can tell this because his can hear the soldier's ragged breaths as clearly as if he is standing next to him along with the evermore random gunfire. Another voice finally answers. "We hear you, trooper, we'll have someone en route,"

Fuck, I could kiss you, crosses Rennin's mind. It sounds like

Commander Jorge Croft.

The soldier cries back, “It’s bad down here, I can’t hold them.”

“Just hang on five more minutes, son, we’re coming.”

There’s a slight pause. “Copy that,” says the soldier quietly with a slight stammer.

Five minutes! Rennin is shaking his head, *that kid’s got* one *at best.* Commander Croft, who Rennin temporarily thought was a godsend, is nothing more than a band-aid for a bullet hole. Might as well have told the kid they were coming next year.

Images flash across Rennin’s mind again of Veidan latched onto the outside of the Possession escape pod, his armour scorched and streaming with flames. He looks like a burning guardian angel.

Veidan’s later words to the throat-crushed tactician in the Crucible’s medical bay echo through his mind: *There’s precious little humanity in all of us, including you*, and Rennin clicks on the communicator, *we should not bury what little we have.* “Kid, you still there?”

“Yes, sir, who is this?”

“This is Gunship Dead Star, I’m twenty seconds out and inbound.”

The soldier’s enthusiasm skyrockets. “Which direction?”

“Right above you,” says Rennin cutting the thrusters, sending the gunship into a near nosedive. Warning lights in the cockpit turn the interior red but Rennin pays no heed. Something comes alive inside of him. He’s going to save this soldier. If he can save this soldier he might be able to save himself. “I don’t have any gunners or troops in here so I’m going to come in low, you’re in and we’re gone, got it?”

“Yes, sir!” replies the soldier in a very determined tone.

The roar of the wind through Dead Star’s engines reminds Rennin of the ancient Jericho trumpet that caused the piercing scream of the incoming Stuka bomber. The ground is approaching so fast that Rennin slams on the reverse rockets, jolting him forwards in his seat forcing what feels like all his blood into his head in one massive rush. He wills himself not to black out, while shaking away the stars in his vision to see he is only two storeys above the soldier. “Get ready!”

“I can see you.”

“Don’t look at me! Stay alive!” says Rennin making his final approach. The rooftop is covered in contaminants, both dead and undead. Rennin opens the side doors less than a metre from touchdown. The soldier’s helmeted head faces the gunship, then the charging contaminants, his legs bouncing all the while, staying ready to make a break for it. Rennin pulses the thrusters causing dust and smoke to fly everywhere and it’s just enough to surprise the contaminants.

“Run, kid!” he cries.

The trooper drops his weapon and sprints towards the gunship. Rennin spins around in his seat so he can see the rear interior of the Dead Star. The soldier dives in, arms outstretched like Superman, with almost enough momentum to slide across the floor and out the opposite side. “I’m in!”

Rennin presses the button to close the doors, using almost enough force to break his finger and blasts the thrusters making Dead Star climb to safety. When high enough he swings the ship around. “Guess what, boys and girls?” he yells at the rooftop crowd while letting off four rockets, firing them line of sight. Two miss but the other two destroy the rooftop and the contaminants with it. Rennin turns Dead Star away and back towards Horizon Stadium. *No sense doing things half arsed.*

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Sindaris Tessol careens into something headfirst that floods his vision with stars. He bounces off it and hits the ground in a daze. Almost immediately hands are all over him, pulling him up, asking him questions. He can’t shake off his dizziness quickly enough to see that he’s being taken indoors. The voices sound muffled, he notices, shaking his head feeling the sting of blood as it enters his eyes. He grunts and fights his arm free of one pair of hands and stumbles into a wall as the others release him.

He looks up to see nothing except a blur. The blood dripping into his eyes is causing them to water. He can see hazy people-shapes huddled around a fire of some kind in the middle of a floor. He also notices something that smells very nasty to him, but to the others it smells so good he can feel their joy. He realises he can feel their psyches.

They’re infected!

He bites his lower lip hard to suppress his rising panic, barely managing to force his mind to picture a vast snowy mountain where he used to ski as a young man. Then again he *is* a young man.

One of them speaks but the sound is awkward, somehow forced. “You… look like you could use some… help,” says a female voice.

Sindaris wills his voice to stay calm and collected, but he tries to make sure that his efforts are behind his thought-wall that block his moods. For an instant he can see the dark hilarity in having to layer his own mind. Realistically, these people probably already know who he is. Why they haven’t killed him is a mystery and he’s not interested in sending them into frenzy. “I’m not hungry.”

Although the others don’t move there is a wave of tension that

momentarily passes over them all. The woman speaks again. “We know who you are, we can hear them talking.”

Sindaris clenches his jaw and almost loses control of his bladder.

“We won’t hurt you,” says the woman.

Sindaris’ vision finally clears and he can see the woman perfectly with his new eyes despite the darkness. “Who are you?”

“I was Sarah Jameson. The others here have trouble talking but I can hear what they want to say,” she says tapping the side of her head.

Sindaris is having a horrible time keeping up with everything that’s happening to, and around, him. “What’s going on?” he manages with a resigned huff.

Sarah’s eyes roll up for just a moment. “The… contaminants… are being driven by something other than what we are now. I’ve heard it talk.”

Contaminant sounds like a military phrase, are soldiers infected too?

“So have I,” says Sindaris.

“We went to the first gathering.”

Conclave? “Gathering…”

Sarah nods. “Conclave… yes… that is what it was.”

Sindaris feels a lump in his throat. He didn’t picture an image of a congress, he only thought the word. “You can read my—”

“We’re not perfect, they say. We’re different. We have different talents. I can hear contaminant minds. You are a contaminant but you’re as different from us as we are from them.”

Despite his efforts he finds he cannot read their minds. “Why?”

“You can function on your own, we cannot. If I go too far from these others here I become… less… able,” Sarah looks to the others. All their eyes are closed, their bodies completely stationary. “They are concentrating so I can talk to you.”

“Are you becoming…” he trails off hoping he doesn’t come across as insulting. “Less intelligent?”

“Not since we reached this point. We are not perfect.”

Sindaris focuses on her eyes and can see that they’re brown shot through with spokes of violet and she has the makings of a vertical pupil but it’s malformed. “Not perfect?”

“Anything that isn’t obedient is not perfect. You are about as imperfect as our kind can possibly be. As far as we can hear, you are one of the only living ones left like you.”

Sindaris frowns, “Only ones *left*?”

“There were nearly twenty until last night.”

“What happened to them?” Sindaris shakes his head trying to understand how he isn’t catching any clues from the others’ minds.

Sarah picks up on his thought. “When the controller sends them

out, it has a resounding influence over their minds. They see what it wants them to. You may have only seen them eat with no reason to think any more of it."

Sindaris' dual pupils fluctuate as he takes in what Sarah says. "You're interpreting my thoughts just offhand?"

"Yes."

"But what happened to them? What do you mean it only lets me see what it wants me to?"

"The other contaminants killed them. The ones they've found, at least. You may have only seen them eating with no other reference."

Sindaris closes his eyes for a moment wondering how many he'd seen them eat with his own mind. *How many of the ones I saw butchered were like me?* Hunted. Trapped like animals.

"You said before that you went to a conclave? What was it for?" asks Sindaris.

"We saw the controller's image through the Conduit. We think it was to put a physical form to the voice in our heads."

"Why?"

"The contaminants are becoming more obtuse as time passes and soon enough they'll be able to do little more than obey simple commands. Run. Kill. Stop. Things like that. A physical meeting brings reality, we think."

Sindaris is fascinated. "What does the conduit look like?"

"God."

Sindaris' head jerks back slightly as if someone flicked his nose. "What?"

"The universal spirit that animates and binds all things," she says, her expression darkening, "and it will bind the infected together."

Sindaris wonders which one of them is talking to him through her and whether it's the same one who's looking at him through her eyes. "So they simply kill anyone like me?"

She nods. "And consume."

"Why? They don't usually eat everyone they catch."

"The others like you were consumed to… absorb your… essence," she says sweating. The collective mind using her body as a junction is obviously taxing.

Sindaris doesn't want to think of himself as a walking evolve-while-you-eat target. "Does it work?"

"No."

"Why would they think it would? Reinfection of themselves?"

"I don't know, we can't access the mind of the controller and the contaminants do what they're told."

"I've heard whispers of a prototype android loose in the city that could be controlling the contaminants," says Sindaris looking at her

more intently.

"It thinks it can."

Sindaris shakes his head. "One moment, if I'm a… different strain, or some such, why can't I reinfect the contaminants?"

"From what we've heard, your kind are sterile."

Sindaris blinks twice. "You mean virally?"

"Yes."

"So if I bleed on someone, they won't catch it?"

"Yes."

Sindaris can't get his head around one thing but he buries it for the moment. "How strange."

Sarah smiles but it's a smile that doesn't belong on her face. "Is that all you… can say?"

"It's all I can think. I don't know who else is listening. I'm trying to resist asking where we are."

"We don't know either."

"Where was this conclave?"

"Blackhaven District, near to Centre-city."

Sindaris' magenta eyes shine. "Do they meet often?"

"Every day. Some of them never leave."

Sindaris decides to ask the question he hid just a moment ago. "Why am I wanted dead if I'm not contagious? I'd understand if I could spread this condition to others and get numbers enough to fight back, but if I'm sterile…"

"You can still reproduce the standard way, we assume. Your children would be naturally immune and would share your mutation."

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In gunship Dead Star, on the way to Horizon Stadium, Rennin's mind is focussed but he can't shake a feeling of absolute euphoria that has gripped his mind like an unrelenting wonderful vice. He feels at one with the world around him and the universe as a whole. He tries to shake it off because it is so incredibly out of character. Also, considering what's happening in the city he should feel more fearful than overwhelmed with joy for simply living. Each drawn breath is so sweet he wonders how long it'll be before he develops a reflexive erection just from converting oxygen into carbon dioxide.

His brow furrows as he glances at his reflection, seeing his artificial eye glowing brightly back at him. His blood runs cold for an instant before being overrun with the most ironclad feeling of wellbeing he's ever known. Something's unnatural about this, he's sure. He cracks his neck and bites the inside of his cheek hard trying

to stem or at least interrupt whatever is giving him this bursting dam of good cheer.

He looks hard at his reflection. His android eye's reflected glow causes something to occur to him. He feels the left section of his head, running his fingers along the edge of the installed segment of his cranium that Caufmann implanted the night Isfeohrad cracked his skull. Caufmann has done something to his brain.

Whatever this euphoria is, it began when he saved the stranded soldier. Thinking further back, when he saved Carla from the Beta HolinMech hit squad he had felt abnormally good then, too. He'd been shot and still managed to kill three fully trained soldiers. Not all of that could be accredited to his Thermosteel bones or andronic limbs.

His frown increases as a thought enters his mind. *Is Caufmann trying to make me do good things?* The thought, at first, seems ludicrous. But there is a definite possibility because when he abandoned Sabre and his troops he'd never felt so miserable. Perhaps it is some kind of microchip reinforcing morally right decisions with elation and enthusiasm, but inducing severe depression when he does something terrible. He wants to panic, but he just feels too damn good.

The soldier Rennin pulled out of danger has seated himself, checking his sidearm to make sure its ready and working. Rennin puts the euphoric paranoia from his mind. He stops fighting and lets it inundate him so he can at least focus on other things. As soon as he feels the full force of it by letting his mind relax he does feel better, an impulse to hug the soldier flitting through his mind. Rennin shakes his head vigorously locking that thought in a mental coffin.

He glances at the monitor in front of him that is rigged to the camera overlooking the passenger bay. No way that kid's potato gun will take out a contaminant. The soldier must still be a teenager. He's medium build, rather long hair for a soldier and a kind of soft looking face. Rennin slaps his own face for taking too much notice of his looks but notes he looks quite similar to Saifer Veidan.

"Hey, kid, what's your name?"

"Private Dorian Carmine, sir."

"Rennin Farrow."

"Rank, sir?"

He almost spits. "Sergeant. I'm taking us to Horizon Stadium, we're reinforcing the defence of the only people left that are immune. Are you up for this?"

"I think so. I don't have my rifle anymore. Don't know if I'd have made it in with the extra weight."

"Put that water pistol away and get an assault rifle from the weapons locker near the rear exit. Get the L10-Sleeper."

"That's a heavy gun, sir, isn't that anti-vehicle?"

“These things need a lot of punishment to go down. The Sleeper is strong, accurate and if you hit them in the soft spot it’ll be more effective.”

“I didn’t notice any weak spots, sir, they just kept coming.”

“Their bones are obviously very thick, you have to hit their guts, their neck, or their eye socket. Your choice.”

“Guts it is.”

“How many of you didn’t make it?”

“Squad of six. There were a lot of screams for help. We couldn’t ignore them.”

Rennin’s expression darkens. “I know how you feel.”

“I was told to hang back where we were stationed in case command asked for status at our position. Next thing I hear is three seconds of shooting then nothing. Then they just came from everywhere at once. I just ran in the nearest building and…” the soldier’s head is shaking. “It was so fast, sir, my head’s still spinning. There was nothing, and then…”

“Alright I’m staying airborne, you can get in the mounted gun and stick here with me, okay?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” he says sounding genuinely grateful.

Rennin feels Drej’s knife pulse again. He shivers and opens a channel to Lieutenant Sabre. “LT?”

“Where the *hell* have you been?” comes the instant, loud, reply.

Here we go. “Picked up a distress call from a stranded soldier, so I went to get him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Coms are a bit screwy, sir.”

“You’re not even a pilot!”

“Well I can put him back where I found him but he’s not going to like it.”

“Just get back here!”

“Situation?”

“Half the immune are away but the contaminant attack is becoming ferocious, we *need* cover fire. Gunship Genome is on its own up there.”

“I’ll hit them in the street before they get to you, when I run out of rockets we’ll reinforce you on the ground and if all the immune are away I’ll pull you out.”

“Make sure you’re quick about it. Once we’re out of here, Desolator is going to fry the area.”

“Right, sir,” says Rennin adjusting his seating trying to ignore Drej’s knife. Its sporadic vibration could definitely be considered unsettling. *The blade that stimulates* and *penetrates.*

A dust cloud is still rising upwards from the Desolator satellite’s

earlier blast outside the stadium. A rectangular evacuation transport is leaving the stadium through the roof access so Rennin banks left towards the undamaged street section, bringing the gunship low enough to see the contaminants dashing through the streets towards the stadium. Rennin suddenly isn't sure whether they're 'going where the meat is' or are being coordinated.

They're coming from Centre-city in great swarming masses. Gunship Genome is laying down heavy fire but the streets are just filled with them. There doesn't seem to be any noticeably thicker or thinner concentrations of them, so Rennin decides to evenly distribute his ordnance across the crowd.

Kind of like communism.

A plan starts to form in his mind. He fires a few rockets into the street surrounding Horizon Stadium. It crumples and distorts into jagged shards of asphalt, concrete and other urban detritus, creating lumps of debris to slow the infected. Hopefully this will clump them together some more.

The impacts are severe, tearing road and enemy to pieces, throwing the remains into the air. Rennin relays his plan to Gunship Genome that is now flying parallel. It follows suit. Rennin orders the pilot to stay on his wing for the duration of the stadium defence and the pair of them, flying side by side, begin firing rockets up the surrounding streets hitting scores of hostiles but there's thousands of them still coming.

Carmine is manning the side-mounted cannon, shooting at what he can on the ground. *He's making some good hits too*, smiles Rennin who hopes Carmine hammers them hard and gets his confidence back. Rennin figures that if Carmine sees them fly to pieces they'll hold less damaging power in his memory. *Real therapy*.

One street is badly blown apart and should be hard to navigate through, hopefully slowing the contaminants' progress. Dead Star and Genome bank sideways in near perfect unison to the next street and commence bombardment. The road again shatters under the impact but the hostiles keep ploughing through, albeit slower. Rennin's sights turn to the stone grandiose buildings lining the streets. He opens a channel with his wingman. "Genome?"

"Copy, Dead Star."

"See that building with the dragon gargoyles?"

"Yes."

"I hate to say it but let's bring it down to block that street off."

"I don't think we're authorised to use that kind of force."

"The Brass, emphasis on *arse*, shot a city block back to the 20th century with a Desolator satellite, don't give me that shit," says Rennin angrily. "Listen, we bring down as many buildings as we can

to block off this central corridor of access streets, it'll force them to divide up either side of the rubble bunching them together. Basically we make our own kill zone for them. Others will have to move around the outside of the debris and with the military being stationed on the perimeter, they'll be easy pickings. It may not seem like it but there is *not* an endless supply of these things," says Rennin. *Yet.*

A slight pause. "Copy, Dead Star, I'll follow your lead."

◆◆◆

Sindaris is talking with Sarah's body. This whole experience is making Sindaris feel uneasy. He could be talking to Sarah or it could be any of the others talking through her at any given time. He is too afraid to go outside the premises at all, even to have a quick peek. There could be anyone out there, and if they see him now he doesn't believe he can outrun them. He's so tired.

"Have you discovered anything that might be able to help me ascertain why I'm like this and so many others are not?"

"Human beings are bacterially evolved organisms. We have survived through mutation for millions of years."

"We're adapting?"

"Some are."

"But the controller says we're imperfect," says Sindaris.

"As far as the virus is concerned. You are the evolutionary dead end of this affliction. In you it is no more an affliction."

"Why has it done this to me?"

"We don't know."

"Look at me! I am seventy-six years old! There must be something!" he says, his dual pupils fluctuating slightly.

"Your age…" Sarah's eyes roll back for a moment, "seems to be a factor. All others like you that we have identified through contaminant memories have been elderly citizens, the youngest being seventy-one."

"Your collective mind must have some kind of idea. A theory, at least?"

Sarah tilts her head, her eyes still rolled up. "Withering tissue causes rather… gaping holes in your physical being. Elderly people have a great deal of weak and or dying tissue. There is a physician in the contaminants that tried treating several people and did some good analysis work before his own infection… re-purposed him."

Re-purposed? "Don't you mean turned or transformed?"

"No."

Sindaris nods once feigning understanding. "What did he find?"

“He…” she swallows that looks more like a hiccup. Her eyes roll back down to refocus on him. “He found that the infected tissue replaces a great deal of your original matter with its own. By the marks on either side of your nose we’d say you wore glasses for most of your life.”

Sindaris had completely forgotten about that. He can see perfectly, better than he ever could. “So a youngster would have far less tissue that needs replacing? Hence less affected?”

Sarah nods. “We believe you aged backwards because the virus rewrote your genetic code to find your optimum physical median.”

“It wanted me in my prime?”

“Yes.”

Sindaris tilts his head to one side cracking his neck. “I’ve heard thoughts of a parasite that grows inside our spine… Do… do I…” he doesn’t want to finish the question, but he doesn’t have to.

“In a sense, yes. But it is different. Even in a fully obedient contaminant absorbed into the share-mind doesn’t have, what you’d officially call, a parasite. It’s a foreign organism of some kind but it doesn’t feed off of you. It’s more like organic technology grown in the central nervous system and it is that which ultimately drives your body and floods the host with the share-mind’s domination.”

Sindaris’ expression turns dark. “Sounds more like an antenna.”

“It is.”

“And I have one?”

“You can interpret the thoughts of others, yes?”

“Don’t be patronising.”

“In you it is different again. I can feel mine move from time to time, but I believe yours is far more symbiotic. The virus expends an incredible amount of energy to rebuild your decaying body and by doing so develops into something different itself. If it was a parasite the same as the others you would have no will of your own.”

Sindaris’ left leg is twitching. “Will the controller of the contaminants physically be at this conclave in Blackhaven?”

“Yes.”

Sindaris looks at the floor thinking fiercely for a moment. “Am I impervious to their control completely?”

Sarah’s gaze becomes distant for a moment. “You can feel their moods?”

“Yes.”

Sarah’s eyes lock with his. “Do you feel as they feel?”

Sindaris sees where this is going. “Yes.”

She glances away for a moment. “Hungry?”

Sindaris nods.

“You’re planning to attend this conclave?”

Sindaris' eyebrow flickers upwards for an instant. "I am."

"I would not recommend it."

Sindaris feels a pulse of anger. He knows that Sarah's converged minds don't think he's up to the challenge of resisting the urge of a full mass of contaminants. "I will not fall victim to those ghastly creatures."

"You will not even be able to think such a thing if there's enough of them around to completely override your minute desire."

"My desires, no matter how piffling, are my own and I will keep them."

Sarah shakes her head. "Considering your age I'd have thought you'd think into this far more than a brash young man. But perhaps this is just a side effect of having brand new hormones."

Sindaris shifts his stance slightly. "I don't see how this makes any difference."

"How will you go unnoticed? They know your face."

"They're becoming less intelligent by the day, and recognition through facial structure is not easily done for the inept. All I have to do is make myself think I'm somewhere else."

Sarah's eyes are focussed on him and wide now. "You believe you can succeed where all other infected persons have failed? Husbands have killed wives, mothers have killed their children, sisters and brothers have maimed each other. Can you possibly lie to yourself enough to ignore such things? Do you think they didn't try to resist? Can you at least comprehend the kind of power it takes to make people kill their loved ones on a whim?"

Sindaris isn't deterred. "As long as I've lived all those things have happened all over the world throughout my life."

"Not half a million times in the same city in one day."

Sindaris closes his eyes as that comment hits home but he says nothing.

"Your willpower would have to be astronomical to remain yourself through such an encounter. In such an environment, even if you could remain undetected, you'd be overwhelmed by the share-mind. You are one person; they are nothing short of legion. You have a few new talents but you are a man, not a god."

"I don't need to be a god. I just need to focus. There are others like me, perhaps I can find them."

"Two have died during your time here."

Sindaris' feels his ears pop at that knowledge and a nervous laugh escapes him. "A minute ago I had half a mind to enter the conclave, think of Disneyland, and shoot the controller through the head," he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand shakily. "I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Sarah nods. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. We will be found sooner or later, but we have decided that dying with some dignity may not be as bad as it sounds.”

Sindaris can’t find an answer even with all his years of developing a formidable mind. He cannot believe that his life has come to this. How can he be brought back from death just to wait in a room to die again? *There’s something I’m missing.*

Sindaris remembers one of the contaminants feeling an overwhelming feeling of terror upon seeing a soldier called ‘Demon’ but that was, of course, Damon Kowalski the poster boy for Beta HolinMech. Though there was another wisp throughout the contaminant share-mind of someone who killed six in one sitting. A marksman. Someone near the lab.

Sindaris closes his eyes intently trying to filter through his own mind and enter the surrounding thoughts of the contaminants. Being only one mind he can simply stretch out his feelings and absorb their thoughts turning his own mind into an intelligence junction. Since all contaminants share their very lives and memories any of them would know who killed the contaminants the night of the first real emergence.

He can see well into the minds of dozens nearby when he really focuses. A disturbing amount of them are eating. There’s a feeling akin to a pinging in his mind when he suddenly gains full knowledge of a coordinated attack on a military group in Centre-city near the stadium. The entire attack isn’t to kill the immune people, it’s to kill one person specifically.

Sindaris hears himself gasp as he learns that this sniper was infected at some point and the genetic scarring by the virus allows contaminants to weed him out with enough effort. A name: Running Fro appears in his memory. Sindaris is sceptical for a moment but remembers that these others are constantly stupefying. He focuses through their minds looking for one that still has enough mental prowess to remember the *real* name.

He is focused for a long time digging through them all, eventually finding a mind with a name *and* an actual image memory.

Rennin Farrow.

Sindaris grins, baring his sharper than normal teeth, as he delves for knowledge of this man.

He learns that during Rennin’s infection the share-mind absorbed a lot of information about him. At least enough information to learn of many conversations with an infamous doctor who’s apparently called: Coughing.

The doctor has terribly bright eyes that shine green and Sindaris himself feels a cold dread towards the colour. The standing image of

the doctor shifts like liquid into the form of Rennin Farrow then back and forth, one to the next, over and over.

The doctor has been combating the virus personally with his toxins and the other fought an unknowing android agent of the controller and survived, and is now murdering contaminants by the dozens. Both these men result in a severe rush of adrenaline and murderous intent. Obviously the controller wants them both dead *very* badly.

It is then that he realises that Rennin Farrow is just a way to find this doctor. *Caufmann.* The contaminants are throwing themselves at the stadium to get to him. At that moment the image of Caufmann transforms into a giant eyeless creature that momentarily overwhelms Sindaris with a terrible wave of fear.

Sindaris' eyes open to meet Sarah's multi-mind gaze. "Don't even think it. They'll all kill you," she says.

Something about having temporary access to all those minds gives Sindaris a vast intellectual boost and with it he senses deception. He flattens the sensation behind a wall of the icy snow he loved as a child. "I'm sorry, but I'm leaving here."

She shakes her head. "It's dangerous."

Sindaris does try but he can't repress a smile for the life of him. "You were truthful in one respect, we are both imperfect."

Sarah's face looks strained. "Yes?"

"You might not realise it but you're still under their influence. Rather hopelessly, I'm sorry to say," Sindaris can feel his muscles tense up and the bones in his knuckles expand pushing against the inside of his skin. "Hunting me failed. So they must have tried setting a few alternate traps around for me. For those like me. I shudder to imagine what happened to those wretched souls."

Sarah shakes her head. "We won't hurt you. We're going to protect you."

Sindaris nods. "I do believe that. I even believe you do also, but I'm afraid it isn't your thought. Allowed, perhaps, but not yours."

Sarah shakes her head. "What? No."

"You're one of them, whether you know it, like it, or not," says Sindaris solemnly.

A tear rolls down Sarah's cheek but it could be any one of the silent ones crying. "No, we're different."

"In some way that's true, but you're obviously trapped here and you feel an overpowering need for me to remain here, don't you?"

"Well yes, but…" something in Sarah's face is struck with realisation and as each of the other minds catches on the expression in her face becomes more certain until finally she speaks again. "No…"

Sindaris' expression softens. "I'm sorry."

“Stop saying that!” she shrieks, taking a step back.

Sindaris takes a step forwards. “The controlling entity wants Doctor Cough-Caufmann,” he corrects, “dead as well as the sniper, very desperately. Desperation indicates that this seemingly invincible contagion is quite fragile to say the least.” He takes a breath as the image of the powerful blind monster slaughtering infected in the arena enters his mind’s eye. “If I kill the controller, you’ll be free. Whatever fragments you have left will be yours.”

Sarah doesn’t answer.

“Free of influence.”

Sarah’s eyes fix on him and there’s a peculiar focus in them. “Influence? If we’re influenced then we have some control.”

Sindaris nods. “Yes, but you’re still being driven.”

Sarah smiles and her misshapen teeth show. “I know how… to help you.”

Sindaris and Sarah’s eyes are transfixed on each other. For a moment Sindaris is struck with paranoia so profound he isn’t sure whether it’s all his own but suddenly everyone in the room is he, himself. He can feel his own mind in all of them as if they *are* him. The others in the room that have remained quietly concentrating so Sarah can speak all open their eyes in unison.

Sarah speaks first a little shakily being on her own mental power. “I am Sindaris Tessol.”

The pair standing next to the barrel fire in the centre of the room speak next. “I am Sindaris Tessol.”

A woman in the corner speaks next. “I-I am-m Sindaris T-Tessol.”

“Oh my god,” says Sindaris, awed as he feels several dozen more versions of his consciousness appear all over the city.

Sarah looks at him. “If we are you, then you are not in Blackhaven killing the controller.”

◆◆◆

With Carmine on the heavy mounted gun, the Dead Star and Genome gunships have taken down a dozen buildings and succeeded in creating a bottleneck for the contaminants down two main kill zones. The military blockade around the district perimeter has been firing for a straight hour. Any contaminant trying to go around the debris is being killed, and there have been so many. Commander Croft’s voice comes over their gunship radios. “Dead Star?”

“Still here.”

“I was going to have you flayed for bringing those buildings down, but your idea sure has worked. Combat is beginning to taper

off. Land your gunship and assist Raston Squad, they must be exhausted."

"Are there many survivors?" asks Rennin.

"Only squad to suffer zero fatalities."

Jesus. "Any hostiles left in the stadium?"

"Still a few pushing, but Raston's holding."

"Copy, sir. Taking us in."

Rennin is still riding a wave of rapture and can't stand it any longer. He takes Drej's knife, holding it above his leg, about to stab himself in the thigh to see if pain will let him think clearly; but the knife vibrates again, distracting him.

The shimmering pearlescent weapon is more a machete than combat knife, the surface seeming to glow before his eyes, the contours in its pattern appear to move or slide as if it's made of liquid. Rennin sheaths it and reconcentrates on landing.

Dead Star and Genome make their final approach. During their aerial descent, Rennin sees hundreds of dead contaminants littering the playing field and about two dozen military left standing. All the immune have been successfully evacuated to the fortified zone in Whitechapel.

Rennin then sees something that makes his mouth drop. An android is standing near the landing zone with a Photon Beam Rifle resting against its shoulder. It is two heads taller than anyone around it. Del. He's been the one holding the stadium line. Rennin is so surprised he doesn't realise he's still descending. Dead Star touches down hard jolting the former watchman and getting a curse from Carmine as everything tilts crazily.

Rennin's still staring at Del through the cockpit when he notices something about Drej's pulsating knife. It's not just random vibration, he realises. His eyes widen. *Morse Code*! Drej has been giving Rennin their whereabouts via his connection to his knife all along. "Feckless cock-swabbing fuck sock!" Rennin half shrieks in self-reproach.

He is still busy wondering how he could have missed something so painfully obvious when a hand clamps down on his shoulder. "I was beginning to wonder if you were ever going to show up," the voice of Arca Drej himself announces.

12.
What's Left Behind

In Horizon Stadium Raston Squad has absorbed the remnants of Rennin's unit and Clone Unit. They are now one single platoon, though in total it is only four additional crewmembers. Caufmann, Del, Drake, Mia Saker, Arca Drej, and Amber Antares make up the sum of Raston Squad itself.

Fully clad in armour, Arca Drej and Antares are completely hidden. Antares is wearing a mask rather than a helmet since her cable-hair won't fit in one. Rennin briefly wonders if being open about what they are would be better for morale, though it would be very hard to explain the presence of a CryoZaiyon.

Rennin hasn't had the chance to speak with Caufmann yet. After exiting gunship Dead Star, an emergency broadcast appears over every working terminal citywide. The Raddocks Horizon evening news anchor, Ellie Andress, is presenting it via the Stadium's big-screen. With 3D technology such as it is she looks like she's sitting just on the other side of a window, albeit a giant.

"As the infection spreads to more areas of Raddocks Horizon, the city has effectively been locked down," she says, *"the local military have commandeered Desolator satellites and fired on a zone apparently overrun by hostile Horizonians. The use of the—thought to be decommissioned—technology has brought into doubt the military's ability to control the rampaging population.*

"Gateway itself has been absolutely flooded with evacuees despite martial law curfew that advises all people to stay indoors, especially at night, and to remain in designated safe zones. As of tomorrow, all areas considered contaminated will be—" she swallows reflexively, *"—cleared. Without exception. Anyone infected trying to leave these zones will be… uh…"* she stammers, looking sideways at someone out of frame for a moment, *"shot."*

Rennin glances at the sky where the circular, clawed, shape of a Desolator satellite can just be seen poking through the cloud line. "Sounds like someone's got an itchy trigger finger."

"Did they always sit so low? Couldn't be higher than a couple hundred metres," asks Drake.

"Gravitic Repulsor technology. They were built to fire in atmosphere, and being so low it made the enemy think twice before shooting them down. There was no way to know what they'd land on," says Rennin, staring back at the screen.

"Earlier today, the Horizon Military fought against the first onrush of

crazed infected in the Middle-city District near to Horizon Stadium. The Godyssey lab has identified them as 'contaminants.' Though the siege was successful it is estimated that over half the troops deployed were killed."

Rennin shakes his head. "Jesus."

"A warning has since been issued that no verbal calls for help are to be heeded under any *circumstances."*

"Didn't they believe our report about the Screamers?" asks Drake.

"In the studio at the moment we have Lord Mayor Nyder Raddocks, whom has graciously agreed to an interview in this very difficult time for the city," she turns in her chair to face Nyder Raddocks. *"Lord mayor, thankyou for joining us."*

Raddocks is an officious looking wiry man in his forties wearing a suit worth more than a full working-class education. *"Good evening."*

"Sir, the public demands to know why we have not called for outside aid."

Raddocks doesn't seem to react at all. *"This disease is not to be risked escaping the city."*

"I'm sure most of us can understand that logically but there is a desperate plea from people in the city to call the Alpha HolinMech unit to help us. As an android strike force they'll be immune."

Raddocks' face remains impassive. *"I'm afraid they aren't available."*

"Mayor Raddocks, we are facing increasingly bleak odds. I'm compelled to ask why they aren't coming? This is a Godyssey-built city and the HolinMech Program is financed and owned by Godyssey, is it not?"

"Ownership and rights of call are not the issue, there have been some serious irregularities with the Alpha HolinMech team."

"How so?"

"We have sent an emergency call to Iyatoya Base on the moon but it has been denied."

"I wasn't aware that distress calls could be denied on this kind of scale."

Raddocks smiles a bland, mechanical smile. *"Miss Andress, Alpha HolinMech units are worth billions of taxpayer dollars and each of them are capable of going head to head with any legion in the world. With that kind of power, you must be very cautious about how to disperse it and be doubly sure that it works."*

"Why the sudden caution now*, though? They've been on dozens of missions, I assume."*

"They have but their last mission was riddled with problems from the beginning. I can't go into specific details, you understand, but the third in command experienced a seizure and one of the newest models disappeared."

"Would this be the one that is rumoured to be AWOL?"

"Missing In Action might be a better description," corrects Raddocks.

"Lord mayor, would the reason behind the denial of aid from the Alpha HolinMechs be that your brother is among them? Second in charge, isn't he?"

Raddocks' composure cracks for barely an instant, if you blinked you would have missed it. His brother being a HolinMech android isn't common knowledge; at least it wasn't until now. Not that it really matters, especially if the death toll continues climbing at its current rate. Raddocks manages a mild smirk. *"My brother is not in question."*

"Can't Iyatoya spare even one of them?"

"The HolinMech lieutenant had a seizure and he is one of the most effective and reliable units ever built. If he can malfunction then all units must go through diagnostics. I'm sure I don't need to spell out the dangers of a haywire android loose in the city."

"Surely not as destructive as a Desolator satellite?"

Raddocks' face reveals nothing. *"Can we simply establish that help from them will not be forthcoming?"*

Andress looks down briefly, subtly upset. Rennin looks at her closely and can almost smell her fear. If she thinks she's going to die here then things are *really* bad. *"Moving on. The people who are immune have been moved here to Whitechapel, are they to be moved outside the city?"*

"If it's necessary."

"I'm just questioning the logic of keeping the immunized in *the city and letting out the people who are uninfected by chance*," says Andress.

"The old township in the Alpine Shire south of here is at full capacity, currently. We were a little overconfident in our assessment of holding off the contaminant attacks, I admit, but Raddocks Horizon is the best place in the country to develop real treatment in the fastest possible time. This infection needs to be dealt with not hidden from."

"Are they test subjects for global immunization?"

Even Rennin's face drops at that. He glances to Caufmann, who is staring at the screen deadpan. Something horrible occurs to him. The immune people would make valuable medical assets and using their immune tissue they could create viable working antigens. In a way, it would be like harvesting. *A hundred to save a million.* He shakes his head. It's not done like that. *Is it?* Carla fits into that category, and he handed her over at Gateway.

On screen, Raddocks shakes his head. *"Of course not."*

"Is there anything we can tell the people who aren't infected that are trapped in areas designated as contaminated zones?"

Raddocks breaks eye contact for the first time since the interview began. *"Stay calm."*

For a moment Andress looks at him with a mildly incredulous

expression but it's clear he's not going to speak again. *"Lord mayor, thank you."*

She turns to face the camera. *"Keep this channel tuned because it will be issuing future emergency broadcasts throughout this crisis. I'm Ellie Andress."*

The screen fades to a blue emergency display with the Godyssey logo in the background and scrolling text along the bottom giving statistics of the danger zones along with current citizen casualties. The casualty list climbs almost by the moment.

Rennin wipes his mouth with the back of his glove and walks towards the edge of the playing field where the toilets are located. He's about fifty metres away when he sees the survivor of Clone Unit enter. Rennin sighs as he remembers seeing the sole survivor walking in a daze when gunship Genome touched down outside the stadium, moments before Rennin attempted desertion. He's still thinking of that image when he enters the toilet just in time for a gunshot to give him the fright of his life.

Something wet hits his face. He's so surprised he doesn't focus immediately, he backs up in some impersonation of a stagger until he hits the wall behind him. His gun is drawn. His eyes soon focus enough to see the dead trooper on the floor.

Suicide.

From Rennin's viewpoint it's all too surreal. White tiles, flickering emergency lights, a dead soldier and all too red blood all over the place. It is like something out of a nightmare. Rennin is still holding his gun on the downed soldier when Mia and Drake storm in.

Mia glances at Rennin's gun, relieved to note it's not smoking. She looks to the rifle next to the dead soldier, evaluating. Clearly that amount of damage to the head could only be caused by a rifle shot. Mia's attention is drawn to Rennin's handgun as he's holstering it. Something inside her hollows out as she sees a symbol on the handle in what seems like slow motion. Mia's eyes are glued to the etching of a passion-nail piercing a heart on the grip, the Logan family crest. It's Dan Logan's gun. In Rennin's hand.

She watches him walk towards the body of the Clone Unit soldier, stooping to investigate. She draws her gun, training it on him without hesitation. Drake looks at her, shocked. "What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at a dead man," she grinds out through gritted teeth.

Rennin's back is to them, but he can see her vague silhouette in the glossy tile work in front of him. He can read her body language intuitively. He smiles, lightly shaking his head when he realises that he drew Logan's gun instead of Killjoy by accident. "Am I under arrest?" he asks, standing and facing them.

"What's going on?" asks Drake.

“Drake, get your gun on him, he murdered Logan, Gilles and Childes.”

Drake looks to Rennin, his face riddled with confusion; the watchman isn’t sure if his fragile mind will stand the strain. Drake draws his gun but there’s no conviction in his aim. “How do you know?”

“He’s got Dan’s sidearm, it was the only thing not found. ”

Drake is stammering with disbelief. “No, n-no. That was Prototype. You saw Dan’s arm, the bones were completely crushed.”

Mia’s eyes are fixed on the former watchman. “You’ve got a mechanical arm don’t you, Farrow?”

Rennin nods. “I killed them. I broke Logan’s arm and threw him out the window. Then I went downstairs and killed the other two while they were coming up.”

Mia bares her teeth. “You son of a bitch.”

“Easy, Mia,” says Drake looking at Rennin. “Why did you do it?”

Rennin’s eyes are like orbs of ice, and with his andronic eye glowing faintly it paints an imposing image before them. He isn’t sure how to say it. It is simple really, they were going to kill his wife. Well, at the time she was his girlfriend, but that just doesn’t have the right impact in his mind. It won’t change the situation. Though if he admits who he was there protecting it will implicate her somehow. That, he will not accept. He decides to kill them. Maybe not Drake, though. *Play it by ear*.

With the flick of his wrist an EMP flashbang pops on his ammo belt. Drake and Mia avert their gaze as the flash blinds them, taking the lights out. Eyes shut or not, Rennin momentarily staggers at the sound. He still has the element of surprise considering he can still see; they are temporarily both deaf and blind. He makes a dash to the side, just as they both open fire on his previous position. He sees an opening between them, and runs for the door to the playing field but Mia takes a pot shot in the direction of his footsteps. His arm explodes in fiery splinters of pain as he is spun by the bullet to come crashing down on the floor.

Everybody stops.

There is total silence, for the moment. The room seems pitch black until their eyes adjust. The only illumination since the flashbang has been from their shooting. All of them shuffle around trying to change position but in the confusion Rennin is sure Mia and Drake mustn’t be sure which sounds are him, or each other.

Mia lets off another shot, chancing to see Rennin’s position in the barrel flash. She hopes that Drake can get a shot into him but in the brief glimmer of light from the gun she sees Rennin is already right at her, knife in hand, eyes blazing. She moves the gun towards him in a

futile effort only to feel his hand grip hers so hard that it could have been cast iron. She feels Drej's knife against her neck beginning to slice as a pair of bright red eyes shine behind him. The cutting stops abruptly.

The temporary power disruption from the grenade ends, and the lights flicker back on. Drake has his gun trained on empty air and is shaking like a leaf. Mia grips the cut on the side of her throat. One more second, and it would have been an ear-to-ear grin. The timely arrival of Arca Drej has saved her life.

The HolinMech has Rennin incapacitated on the floor by kneeling on his chest with a forearm across his throat. Rennin isn't looking at anyone and appears to be resigned to capture.

Drej hoists Rennin to his feet keeping a firm grip on his arms. The HolinMech says nothing, acknowledges no one, while taking Rennin out of the toilets and back onto the field where the rest of the unified Raston Squad are waiting. They're all shocked to see Rennin restrained; Carmine, Sabre and Jawa even more so when they see Drej's face. "A HolinMech?" cries Sabre.

Caufmann's face is dark. "Why did you take your helmet off?"

"It's poorly crafted and interferes with my night vision."

"You're Arca Drej," exclaims Jawa.

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After some very generalized explanations, the Horizon Military contingent are filled in well enough to understand that Arca Drej's presence is to remain a secret. Antares remains concealed in her mask, for a CryoZaiyon would be impossible to explain.

Rennin Farrow, in the meantime, is in serious trouble over the murder of the three Beta HolinMechs. He is handcuffed to one of the seats in the spectator stands.

Caufmann walks over to him and stares at him for a few moments. Rennin looks up. "We have to stop meeting like this."

For another few moments Caufmann just looks at him. "What were you thinking?"

"She recognised the gun I was carrying and knew it was me who killed her friends."

"No, Rennin, I mean with killing the three soldiers."

Rennin's eyes don't flicker, he doesn't even blink. "They were there to kill my wife." She wasn't at the time, he knows, but it's not like that makes much difference now.

"It's still senseless murder."

Rennin smirks, "Murdering murderers?"

“The lieutenant wants to take you to their HQ in Whitechapel to answer for it. Mia wants you dead.”

“And you?”

Caufmann looks over to the others that are sitting together. Drej has his helmet back on. Del is standing a few feet away from the rest of them, sniper rifle at the ready. “If they were there to kill Del…” something cruel flashes over his expression just for a moment. “I would have done the same as you.”

Rennin nods once. “That’s what I wanted to know.”

“But I would have gotten rid of the damned gun.”

Rennin laughs. “I’m a sucker for craftsmanship.”

“You are in *real* trouble here, Ren.”

“I know.”

Caufmann stops looking at the others and fixes his scarred eyes on Rennin. “You were going to cut her throat for avenging her friends?”

Rennin closes his eyes and frowns. “No. I was going to kill her because she pulled a gun on me.”

“And Drake?”

Rennin shrugs subtly. “Hadn’t decided. If he took a real shot at me I would have sliced his neck open when I rushed passed him to go for Saker.”

“That answer will not help your case.”

Rennin looks at Caufmann with more conviction than he has ever had. “Have a good look outside and ask yourself if I’m the worst this world has. I was defending someone I care about and I’d kill them all to protect her; I’d even kill you. Not in a straight fight against a CryoZaiyon, maybe, but I’d find a way.”

In all the times Caufmann and Rennin have talked throughout the years, this is the first time that the doctor has been genuinely shaken, and it takes him a moment to gather his thoughts. “Saker was only doing what you’d do, Rennin.”

“She would have done *exactly* what I did that night. She’s more like me than I am.”

Caufmann nods then looks to his forearm gauntlet. “Did you hear all that, Mia?”

Rennin’s head shoots up and his eyes are wide with shock. There’s a pause but Mia’s voice comes over the small speaker in the device. “Yes, Doctor Caufmann.”

Rennin’s head drops, resigned. “Oh you… you mechanical bastard.”

Caufmann can’t suppress a smile. “What do you want to do?” he asks her.

There’s a long pause. “You were going to unlock him anyway, so

do it."

Caufmann closes his gauntlet then steps over to Rennin. He moves to remove the restraints but they're already open. The doctor looks him in the eye, "Stand up."

Rennin does so. "You didn't seriously think I was going to be 'taken' to Whitechapel, did you?"

"If you'd managed to unlock them, why didn't you just go?"

Rennin smiles again, "Go where?"

"Point taken." Caufmann inclines his head and they start walking back towards the rest of Raston Squad. "Sabre will still want to take you in."

"I'll keep that in mind next time he tells me he loves me."

Caufmann shakes his head and nods to Sabre when they get back to the group. "Anything you want to say?"

Sabre looks at Rennin then to Caufmann and back to Rennin. "If they were my boys, I'd have your head."

"Noted," says Rennin.

"But I suppose we'd all do the same and we've got bigger problems waiting in the streets."

"He saved my life, he could have been killed but he saved my life," says Carmine.

Drake stirs slightly but his right hand is shaking. "I don't know. Everything's fucked up."

Mia is silent for a while. "You even saved my life, but I find it hard to believe you find value in anything, Farrow," she says, accentuating the F in his name derisively. She walks over to him and takes his left hand. He doesn't resist. She peels back the finger stub of his glove so she can see his wedding band. Mia is quite surprised that he actually has one.

The Beta HolinMech drops his hand and walks away.

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An hour passes. They've taken the body out of the restroom where the soldier from Gunship Genome committed suicide. Rennin has been given a wide berth by the human troops, but as he grazes around the playing field he imagines what it'd be like to be a sports star. He would probably have had a free pass out of the city.

Del follows him around silently. Occasionally Rennin looks behind himself to see the android juggernaut seemingly mimicking his movements. Despite Del appearing rather docile at the moment, Rennin feels on edge when he realises all the impact craters around the ground must have been from Del's Sunbreaker photon rifle.

Rennin takes a deep breath of the fresh grass and Del imitates him. Rennin gathers that Del is probably trying to speak to him but without a screen he can't know for sure. Del continues to copy his movements, stop and face him without moving at all, then move again when Rennin does. The android is pacing now, seemingly frustrated at something.

Caufmann is over at the gunship monitoring more sieges springing up around the city. Raston Squad will be called in again soon. The silence within the eye of the storm is about to pass.

Whitechapel has been under serious assault but the troops are holding them back for now. Some smaller fights have sprung up yet military losses aren't anywhere near as bad as the first campaign. Caufmann is gladdened by the fact that the soldiers are adapting quickly.

Rennin looks around Raston Squad. He can imagine that they are holding up the best of all due to their android advantage but even here there are serious problems. Unrest, an unpredictable deserter HolinMech, an untested eight-foot combat model, a suicide, a Beta HolinMech on the verge of a mental collapse, an unstable sniper and two CryoZaiyons risking discovery. He looks over to Drake, who is wandering near the edge of the field with Mia. Studying Drake he knows that some people, should they even survive, won't ever truly leave this city.

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Drake has just told Mia about the moment he shot his father. His eyes are closed and he's leaning on the fence. He didn't need to tell her about the night he shot the little girl, she was in the same building. Mia is shocked but is rarely short of words. "I know he was an arsehole but…" she shakes her head.

"I don't know. It made sense at the time. In a kind of clarity you only experience like…" his face is creased with a frown, "hitting a perfect shot in golf, or… or catching a ball that was travelling so fast you didn't even see it."

"You said he had a pass to get out of the city?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you use it?"

"I gave it to Samara."

"The maid?"

"My friend."

Mia nods, "Did she get out?"

"She did," Drake smiles. "My father thought he was very clever

paying more for a pass that had no name attached. ‘A Drake doesn’t run away’ I think he said once.”

Mia is looking at Drake closely and the smile he has on his face mentioning Samara escaping compared to the reptilian one when he mentioned his father almost makes her shiver. “Rennin shake you up much?”

“I’m scared to death of him. I feel the same when around Caufmann, too. Both of them are just…” he trails off but his hands move as if trying to will the thoughts together to produce adequate words.

“It’s okay, I know what you mean,” she rotates her shoulders not really knowing how to be comforting.

Drake’s dark eyes fix on hers. “I’m so sorry.”

She frowns. “What?”

“For shooting you. I’m so sorry,” the second apology is barely a whisper.

She’d forgotten about that. Maybe it should bother her, but it really doesn’t. He is a normal guy, at least he *was*, and probably would never understand. “Try to forget about it.”

He shakes his head. “Caufmann said—”

She grabs his face firmly but not forcefully. “I don’t care what Caufmann said.”

Drake’s hands are starting to shake a little. “The thing that really hit me when Rennin attacked us in the toilets is that we’re murderers too.”

“Hey,” she moves her hands and grips both of his, “they were going to suffer far more if we didn’t do what we did.”

“We didn’t know the others in the houses were infected.”

“If you think about it forever you’ll do your own head in so far down you’ll be poked in the eye by the seat before you even sit down.”

Drake huffs a laugh. “I think my head is crammed up the other way.”

“Yeah, well don’t enjoy the view too much.”

Being so close to her Drake notices the cut on her neck that very nearly took her life. He runs his thumb very lightly underneath and along it. “Jesus…”

Mia tilts her head just slightly without realising it. “He cuts like a grandma.”

For the first time since he’s known her he notices Mia’s blue eyes with flecks of brown and her dirty blonde hair tied into a bun that’s tighter than her grip on his hand. He’s about to speak but instead finds himself kissing her. Or she kisses him. He doesn’t know, and doesn’t care. Feeling her hand on the back of his neck turns all his conscious

thought off and for one glimmer in time all he can feel is delight.

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Arca Drej is sitting in a toilet cubicle with the door shut. He isn't going to the toilet, he never has and never will need to. He's staring straight ahead. The voice from under the city is still calling for help, but he doesn't want to think about that. He doesn't want to think about anything. The more he thinks, the harder the tapping gets. It's happening right at this moment, *tap-tap-tap*, right where his heart should be if he were human. He's starting to think again already. The tapping gets harder. Drej tries to remain calm but feels his face briefly morph into a fierce expression as if he's in a battle of wills with his own physicality.

A heart beats. What this thing is inside his chest was never a heart.

Not many have seen any assembly footage, not even those in the innermost circles of the Godyssey Company. Sergeant Joseph Yomak, Reaver-class HolinMech like Drej himself, showed him the footage of Regon Tirren's conversion from man to the thing he became. Drej replays the images in his head in perfect clarity as if it were happening to him now.

HolinMechs are discouraged from using their total recall very often because it can trap them within the memory, starting a cycle that invariably results in thought-spiral; an irreversible condition. It's similar to catatonia in Standards. Unfortunately the thought line they're trapped in becomes the sole focus of their existence and kill-code erases everything else in their mind. In many cases it fries the organic part of the brain rendering an android—once worth more than the entire economy of some countries—as useless.

Drej's eyes glaze over and as far as he's concerned he's back in his room on Iyatoya with the form of Joseph Yomak sitting in front of him.

Drej was sitting on his bed, and Joseph at his desk fiddling with a monitor. The window above the desk showed a view out into space, with part of Earth peeking in at one side. Drej was mesmerised by the sliver of Earth and didn't notice Joseph talking until a ball of synthesized paper hit him in the face. Drej looked at Joseph's neon-blue eyes. "Are you paying attention?" asked the Sergeant.

"To what?"

Joseph smiled for some strange reason that Drej still doesn't understand. "You'll miss a great deal if you keep daydreaming."

Drej recognised the feigned emotion for what it was and imitated

it perfectly back at him by willing the sides of his face up. “I can see what you do.”

Joseph turned his attention back to the screen he was tinkering with. “You’ve been in for maintenance,” he said softly.

“This morning. How do you always know when each unit goes in for maintenance? The order is almost always random.”

Joseph ran a hand across the top of his head and closed his eyes. Drej remembers thinking that the Sergeant would be an ideal infiltrator with human traits so well imitated. “Why are your eyes blue? We’re the same chassis type but mine are red.”

Joseph looked back to him. “Something is different about you.”

“Yours are the blue eyes. Mine are red, just like the others. You are different, not I.”

“I’m a clone. All Reaver-class units are clones. Your eyes should be blue.”

“Magnus and Cain’s are green, they’re Reaver-class.”

“No they’re not.”

Drej’s eye twitches. “Their dossier says they are.”

“The one we are allowed to read says that, yes.”

“Then what are they? Maybe we are both odd, they share green eyes and you and I are both different.”

“I don’t know. It’s irrelevant. What ever they are, they are not the same chassis type, there are too many differences in their strengths and fighting styles. You’ll notice that they are both far more drawn to physical strength whereas you and I favour energy-based attacks,” said Joseph.

“Still.”

“Still, nothing. They are not Reaver-class because they are not clones.”

“Clone tissue was supposed to be unusable due to its rapid degeneration,” said Drej.

“Boson-tissue is not. We are rebuilt from partial samples. In a way we’re all just copies.”

Drej nodded and pretended he understood the meaning behind Joseph’s words. He glanced at the screen Joseph has finally stopped adjusting. “What are you doing with that?”

Joseph smiled a genuine smile this time, at least as much as an android can manage. That smile tended to get anyone in the vicinity in trouble. The HolinMech Lieutenant, Cain, once required three days in maintenance for letting his curiosity get the better of him in regards to Joseph. “Want to see something?”

“No.”

“A wise answer,” said Joseph as the screen flickered to life. The video that began to play was an operating table featuring HolinMech

Regon Tirren. At the time Joseph played the recording the actual Regon Tirren was right next door.

The video played at several thousand times the normal rate and they saw in a few silent minutes what takes a fortnight of surgery to achieve. The body of Regon is almost hollowed out and flickers around the body were the toiling surgeons. Slowly the body was opened from neck to groin. Very carefully.

“Does this serve a purpose?” asked Drej.

“Most of it is merely gore for the sake of itself, to anyone but the conversion techs,” said Joseph, riveted to the screen. The image paused where the doctors were installing a white, pearlescent box about the size of a foot. Pausing at that exact moment would be impossible for a human unless by million to one odds.

“What’s that?” asked Drej.

“Do you really need to ask?”

“The Instinctual Cluster.”

Joseph nods, “Made of our own artificially grown bone.”

“Strange.”

“I think you mean conductive.”

Drej found that an obscure comment, “What do you mean?”

“Perhaps you would like to know what’s inside it?” asked Joseph seeming to ignore him.

Drej had never thought of it before and glanced to the frozen image on the screen. “Yes. I would like to know.”

“So would I. As far as I can tell we would be mind-wiped for even hearing rumour of this, but in that box is the last piece of purity we have as life forms.”

After that conversation, Joseph left. That night Drej thought more than he ever did about the great dilemma of an android. How different are ones and zeroes? One means active. Zero means inactive. These ideas bounced back and forth in his mind for hours. That was the night he first felt the tapping in his chest. That was the night he had his first nightmare.

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Sindaris Tessol is cold. Despite being wrapped in a thick hooded jacket, fully lined and two sizes too big, given to him by one of the group he holed up with earlier, he doesn’t feel covered enough. The dangling straps at the collar with D rings at the ends, pockets in the sleeves, grey lining and mesh over the grey makes him look like some kind of dark jester.

He’s standing in an alleyway looking over the streets in

Blackhaven District. He managed to get into the area easily enough but the military are blockading this quadrant off, and that's driving the contaminants towards the central zone to avoid detection.

Sindaris gazes upwards at the sky to see a Desolator satellite moving into position, not directly overhead but close enough to flatten the street Sindaris is in.

With the conclave nearby, the contaminants have started to panic; but the more intelligent are going underground. And the less intelligent are going to be used as bait. Blackhaven is one of six suburbs encased in the new blockade and the soldiers will be deployed to clear it soon.

The whisper amongst the share-mind spreads horror, an image of a bald, sightless android that is coming to kill them all. Sindaris can sense a fear so thick in the minds of the contaminants that he can feel other mind try to recoil. The massive android is firing a rifle that looks like it belongs on top of a tank. The stream of fire it emits is solid light, like a Jacob's Ladder yet impossibly hot, shearing through bodies like butter. Several contaminants get within reach, but the android swings the rifle like a club, coming down so hard the infected local is almost crushed flat. It fires projectiles from its wrists throwing contaminants off their feet with the force, and its claw attacks can cleave limbs. It's a walking nightmare.

Sindaris feels a wave of renewed fear pass through the share-mind, and for a moment he's drawn in with them. He puts his hand in his pocket, gripping the handgun, taken from someone or other by the contaminant that gave him the hooded jacket. He doesn't want to know where it came from exactly but it's the best chance he has at taking out the controller.

Part of him doesn't want to find out what's underground, especially with how clear his eyesight is. Sindaris wonders if he'll ever be able to forget any of the horrors he's already seen. The average human can only focus on approximately the size of a thumbnail on their outstretched hand but with binary pupils Sindaris' range of focus is the size of a basketball. For a while it was very awkward for him to get used to. If only he knew how to fire a gun with a practised hand he'd be quite the sharpshooter.

He can still sense the other copies of his consciousness out in the city; but there are fewer by the hour. Sindaris finds himself smirking at how he is the real him and must pretend he's someone else, and some*where* else. He looks from the claws of the Desolator satellite poking through the clouds to an alley across the street. The sky is cloudy and with the mass blackout the night would have been pitch black if not for his ability to see in the dark.

Sindaris can hear gunfire in the distance coming from all

directions, and assumes the contaminant decoys are attacking the blockade already. The alleyway entrance to the conclave beckons, and Sindaris makes a run for it. The D rings of his jacket jingle lightly despite his efforts to immobilise some of them.

Dark Jester, he thinks ruefully. He's scared almost out of his mind of becoming a possessed thrall to this controlling entity, responding to any whim like a good subject of this unholy court.

He stops just inside the mouth of the alley and looks out onto the street for one last time. He can feel a strong mental pull from the conclave; it feels like an intense sense of understanding or acceptance. Maybe both.

Sindaris briefly doubts that he can resist the sheer mass of minds.

But I have to, he thinks, taking his first step in.

I must.

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Rennin is pacing in front of Caufmann, a few steps to and a few steps fro.

The doctor thinks he's having some kind of stress related episode at first, before Rennin asks a question that genuinely has him stumped. Caufmann considers several replies, discards them all, and asks a question instead. "Programmed you?"

"The night of the GA Rally part of my head was crushed. What did you put in?"

"A replacement skull fragment made of Thermosteel Plasma."

"And?"

Caufmann isn't sure what Rennin knows about his operation but he's certain that the former watchman doesn't have any idea about the piece of brain he took. "And nothing. What's wrong?"

Rennin relays what happened in Gunship Dead Star when he tried to flee and when he rescued Carmine, emphasising how horrible and how good he felt. "So what do you think?"

"I don't know."

"*All* you put in was a piece of skull?" asks Rennin stepping towards him.

Rennin isn't a fool, so Caufmann comes clean. In his way, at least.

"There was some damage to your brain so I implanted a small gland that is designed to simply make you feel better."

"That's it?"

Caufmann nods, "I don't have the expertise required to program a human mind."

"But what about all the other shit I feel whenever I do anything?"

Caufmann shrugs dismissively, “The gland gives you a slightly elevated sense of wellbeing, all the other mood related rise and falls is you, yourself.”

Rennin blinks. “What?”

“You’re feel better in general, so when you do something that in your view is cowardly or cruel you feel as bad as you ever did but because you’re constantly feeling good it just *seems* like you crash harder.”

Rennin shakes his head, “I’m not talking about a mood swing. This is different. *Intense*.”

“Rennin, when you do something you believe is a good thing, of course you’ll feel better. It’s a side effect of the gland and you’ll adjust with a little time.”

Caufmann figures that if Rennin believes him, he’ll be fine. If he knew part of his brain was removed it would damage him badly. Rennin, on the other hand, can’t believe he’s getting a lecture on emotions from an android.

“I guess that makes sense.”

“Anything else?”

Rennin shakes his head, then, “Oh wait, yes,” he reaches into his webbing pocket and pulls out a slightly beaten envelope. “Rethrin asked me to give you this.”

Caufmann takes it, opens the picture of Forgal Lauros, and his eyes scan over it for a second before his entire form freezes. He’s so still he could literally pass for a statue. After a long pause he looks slowly back to Rennin with an expression of absolute neutrality, if there is such a thing. “Where did she say she got this?”

“She didn’t. I only looked at it after she was gone. She said I had to place it in your hand and if I’m right about what that picture means, I can see why.”

“He’s wearing HolinMech armour,” Caufmann says as if he’s about to be sick.

“Let’s show Drej then, ask what he knows.”

“We don’t need to. I know what it means,” his shoulders slump.

“But Drej—”

“No one else sees this, or hears of it, am I understood? If Godyssey finds out you’ve seen this picture you’ll be killed.”

“What, and leave all this?” he says gesticulating at the situation they’re in.

“Or you could be converted and enslaved like my kind.”

Rennin feels an ice needle suddenly lodged in his chest. “Can I get back to you on that?”

“Buy a vowel?”

“Something like that,” Rennin cracks his neck. “Look, William, I

think all this is pretty far over my head, but it seems to me that all this is pointing to another CryoZaiyon War. I fought that last battle. *We* fought it. The Solar System was under siege for the entire last year.

"It was absolute bedlam. There wasn't one single fight that stopped. For a fucking year. Because you guys don't need sleep. If Venus III hadn't happened, we'd still be at war with the GA. Only now it would be with sticks and stones. There was nothing left at the end. The world won't survive another one."

Caufmann's eyes are wide and focussed. "We're at war now. What is all this destruction if not a war?"

Rennin glances down then up again. "Did you ever study history?"

"I have detailed files on studies conducted on more civilizations, real and mythical, than you could possibly know of."

Rennin lets the condescension of the comment slide. "Over three hundred years ago there was a war in Chechnya that most of the world ignored because no one knew what to do."

"Meaning?"

"This is just a city. In ten years if this fight against the multiplying infection is still going, and it probably will if we don't stop it here, it will remain '*just a city*.'"

"It will not be going for ten years, I assure you."

"I think you see my point, sir," he moves to walk away.

Caufmann grabs his arm. "Ren, pack your gear and get the team ready."

"Next mission?"

"For now, yes. I told you we're getting out of here and we will. Alive. All of us."

Rennin smirks, "You don't have the power to make that kind of promise," he says, thinking of Wayne and making him a promise to get him out of here too.

Caufmann sees something in Rennin's expression. "What's on your mind?"

"I have a stop to make on the way out," he says, feeling a slight rise in his mood already. *I'll get you out if you're alive, Wanker. I will. Then I'm going to kick your arse so hard, for not leaving sooner, that you'll be undoing your tie to take a dump.*

Caufmann doesn't say much more, he just walks off staring at the picture, the *recent* picture, of his former commander. He absorbs the image of HolinMech Forgal Lauros, burning it into his brain.

He has no idea where it came from. Someone recognised Lauros and thought it important enough to smuggle this single frame from wherever it was taken. People may die for seeing this picture, if they

haven't already. Caufmann scans back through his memory and makes himself relive the moment that Forgal and Saifer's life signs suddenly flatlined.

For over a decade he thought they were both dead. He should be happy to see him alive, but to see him in HolinMech armour carrying a HolinMech weapon means only one thing to him.

Traitor.

Maybe Saifer was right to distrust him all those years ago during the war. Because here is evidence of the techno-era Achilles alive and well, yet Saifer is not. Something about that thought makes Caufmann's head twitch, and readings suddenly fly up his glasses' lenses:

Status achieved.

Encryption Code Parameter One: Accepted.

Parameter Two: Pending… Pending… Failed.

Unlocking hidden memory file 86.

Blocking outside invasive surveillance.

Caufmann feels his scalp prickle. His eyes clamp shut in pain, followed by loud feedback sounds screeching agonisingly against his eardrums. It's an android jamming technique as a safeguard to prevent remote hacking. Not that it has ever happened before, as far as Caufmann knows. He doesn't even know about hidden memory files *within* his own mind. Also this is Number 86, no less, so there are at least eighty-five others.

The feedback screaming in Caufmann's ears abruptly stops and he's alone again in silence. Caufmann's mouth falls ajar as he realises that the jamming signal is designed to stop anyone listening to certain frequencies from decoding a message that's being received from an outside source. Caufmann's own reflexive jamming system activated because he just downloaded something, not because he was opening a hidden memory from in his own head.

Downloading from where?

The collar of his black armour-weave lab coat feels excessively tight suddenly. Somewhere out in the solar system there must be a copy of his mind that's obviously programmed to send him particular information at particular times. He must have rigged it himself. But he doesn't know when, or where. He scans but there's no data available for him.

Parameter One: Accepted.

Memory 86 begins playing in his head. All around him the scenery changes but stays the same as if a superimposed image is placed over reality. In waves of a few seconds each it changes from reality being dominant to the memory. He feels his head tilting upwards and the barely visible reality slides but the memory layer

doesn't.

In his mind's eye he's standing in icy tundra but it's not the roaring blizzard of Venus III, he's sure. He was stationed in Alaska for a while and at that thought Saifer Veidan flickers into view a few metres away in his visual range. The flickering image soon stabilises and looks all too lifelike for a mere holographic memory. Once the image is completely clear it walks a few steps forwards facing away from Caufmann's vantage point as if surveying the area. He falls deeper into the memory and the entire atmosphere shrouds out his conscious mind. The sounds of war can be heard way off on the horizon where there are flashes against the sky from detonations and artillery fire.

Saifer Veidan's form is filthy. His bare arms are snaked with fresh wounds, his black armour is cracked and his hair is longer than Caufmann can ever remember it. Veidan turns to face him revealing a hole blown clean through his chest plate. Most of his blood is dried but the wounds are all still emanating cold mist.

"What made you leave the front line?"

Veidan speaks. "Orders. Captains Akcoda, Zillah and Wakefield have engaged GA forces head on at the frontline."

Caufmann feels Decora speak. "Aren't they outnumbered?"

Nothing changes in Veidan's tense demeanour. "Aren't we always?"

"Since we lost the Crucible everything's going wrong," Caufmann says feeling Decora's hand rub against the side of his face.

Veidan's image flickers for a moment. "The Crucible was…" he trails off looking back to the flashes on the horizon, "unfortunate. Costly."

"How could a ship that size disappear?"

"How did you even know it was gone so early?"

"I don't remember. I told Valhara as soon as it entered my mind. I'd only just gone for maintenance, and there have been gaps—"

"What did she say?"

Caufmann feels Decora shrug. "Cyranda station must have shot it down."

Veidan seems to relax a little, "We didn't want anyone to know until we were in a position to fill the vacuum left by suffering such a loss."

He feels his head shake. "I just cannot understand why we ordered the Possession to intercede when the Crucible was under attack. We lost the ship and almost the entire crew and all for nothing. The Crucible escapes, returned to treat the Indigo Reign fallout, then vanished. Where did it go afterwards? It never came out of hyper transit."

“Why is Valhara still here? It was a simple retrieval. What is she doing here?”

“She wants their general.”

Veidan looks to the blasts in the distance, “There may be nothing left when she’s done.”

“I’ll let her know you’re here,” Caufmann feels Decora switching channels in his head to talk to the wing commander.

“Not yet,” the lieutenant orders.

Something in Veidan’s expression changes but Decora lacks the emotional range to tell what it is, and Caufmann is mentally too far away to gauge it himself. Veidan speaks.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Nex.”

“It doesn’t matter, we have to make do with what we have.”

“No,” Veidan shakes his head and puts his hand up, “I mean I don’t know what I *can* tell you.”

Caufmann feels Decora’s shoulders tighten. “What?” Veidan never kept secrets. Normally.

“This isn’t just a war, Nex, everything we do is watched. There’s so much more than a political regime at stake for us. You understand that, don’t you?”

Caufmann can feel Decora’s hands moving, preparing medical treatment for the wounded CryoZaiyon. “Yes, Saifer.”

“We have to take care of our own future. I won’t say at any cost because I have my limits, but others do not.”

“You and Zillah have been on the front line for months. You need to let me bring the pair of you in.”

Veidan seems to ignore him. “There are steps that will be taken soon, and I cannot return to Iyatoya. Not now, but I will.”

“Where is this going?”

Veidan looks at him with an oddly resigned expression as if he’s just come out of maintenance, “The war office is pushing the House of Representatives to award more substantial sums to Godyssey’s budget tomorrow.”

“What for? Are we being reinforced?”

“Apparently. There’s a new system design prototype that’s ready for action. It’s called ‘HolinMech.’”

“That’s the system design that went haywire during the Montrialis test flight.”

“Yes, and responsible for the entire crew’s death as well as the loss of the ship itself,” says Veidan.

“There’s a new line then? That’s all?”

Veidan shakes his head. “We have to stop it before it begins. We smuggled a copy of the specs out and according to our diagnostics they’ll be little more than slaves. With resources at their current level

it'll be enough to produce a thousand per city planet-wide."

Caufmann feels Decora frown. "Occupation?"

"The general consensus among those of us who've seen these reports leads that way, yes."

"Then this war…" he trails off.

Veidan nods. "Is paving the way for automatons to keep the peace. Whoever owns the iron hand will own the world. Or in this case it's the Thermosteel hand."

"What are you planning to do about this?"

"It's already happening. I'm telling you now because I trust you. I would have told you sooner but I'm not sure what to make of Valhara, yet," he says, his green eyes blazing against the night sky with the explosions littering the sky behind him. "There will be reports of Thermosteel going missing in the near future. A lot of it."

"I know about the missing stocks. Hundreds of metric tonnes are missing."

Saifer looks at him curiously, "Valhara told you?"

"Candidly. She said no Thermosteel means no army."

Veidan nods again, "She's right. The next question is what happens to us."

Caufmann feels the sides of his face pull up into a smile. "Maybe we should fight *with* the GA, after all."

Veidan glares at Decora. "Have no illusions, there are no sides among humans for us."

"I agree. We can't trust our own side, we certainly can't defect to a side that wants us all dead, so where does that leave us?"

"On our own, where we always have been. Our barracks are a prison, our state of being is conscripted, and we get lobotomised if we misbehave. We fight for Godyssey but they are not '*on our side*' by any stretch of the imagination. Remember that."

Caufmann can remember that he didn't fully understand what Veidan really meant, but there is a lot he didn't understand about the lieutenant. "Are you sure about all of this?"

"We've lost hundreds of androids, have you ever seen a funeral? A send off?"

"Of course not."

Veidan's clenched fist appears. "That's what I mean. That's binary coding telling you how to respond slightly behind your conscious will. We are thinking entities that are fighting a war that's apparently for a free way of life. New medicine, cures for the maimed and crippled, replacement limbs for amputees and even new brain material for people who are too damaged to function. But we're going to lose everything for this to come true."

Caufmann feels Decora's head shake. "I don't know what to say."

“And you don’t have to. Though one day, you will understand why,” he says taking a step forward, “I killed everyone in Iyatoya base.”

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Caufmann is suddenly back in reality. The memory is sealed in his mind where it is once again fully accessible. He looks at the time display in his glasses to see that only two seconds have passed since he’s downloaded the file. He notices his gauntlet is flashing and he opens it to receive a frantic message from a bloodied Jellan Roths at the lab. The blood doesn’t appear to be hers. She’s calling his name desperately.

He manages to calm her down enough to get out a clear and terrible sentence. “They’re out, William! They smashed the lab to pieces!” When Caufmann asks whom she answers: “The Suvaco units. They’re out!”

13.
The Cold Heart

In the hours that follow Doctor Roths' desperate call to Caufmann, the Suvaco units move through the city in an ever expanding spiral from the lab, killing only Horizon Military. Thus far they seem content to remain around the laboratory; a fact Caufmann finds most alarming.

Doctor Roths survived the initial emergence of the Suvacoes, and their mission to lay utter waste to the remaining security staff following Isfeohrad's attack. Del has already flooded Caufmann's gauntlet with text expressing a predatory eagerness to attack the nearest Suvaco, leading to Caufmann gaining Commander Croft's consent to send Raston Squad to intercept one.

Some footage of Suvaco movement has been captured and filtered through to Raston Squad, who watch it avidly on the Horizon Stadium big screen. They do indeed operate as a hive unit, communicating telepathically to effectively coordinate their offensive but due to Caufmann's sabotage while in stasis, they are clearly having some problems synchronising. As if to demonstrate, one of them simply lost balance and fell over. However, size and the weaponry taken from Del's cell makes fighting them very difficult. Del is upset at having his weapons *'stolen',* as he terms it. This affront has him increasingly seething.

Rennin is lying on his back in the centre of the field, while the remaining troops load armaments and themselves into Gunship Dead Star. The night sky is overcast but quite pleasant, aside from the looming claws of a Desolator satellite poking through the cloud line like a great taloned hand reaching down for him.

He holds his left hand up and looks at the wedding band glowing in the dark. Rennin is soon knocked out of his thoughts by a sharp kick to the leg. He looks across to see Drake and Mia standing to his left. Upon a quick inspection over them he notices their dishevelled clothes, messy hair and clasped hands.

Rennin smirks and looks at Mia. "Wipe your face, some of Drake's lipstick rubbed off."

"Get up, we're leaving," she says.

Rennin lifts his head off the ground. "You're glowing."

"Are you going to get up?" asks Drake quickly.

Rennin rolls his head to face Drake and shakes it. "Next time take her some place decent."

"I'm scared to ask what you'd suggest."

Rennin looks at Mia and shrugs, “Bus shelter?” receiving a harder kick to his leg as a reward.

“Alright, alright! I’m up,” as he clambers to his feet.

Mia dusts the grass off his shoulder. “You’re a Sergeant, try to look like one. At least, until you get killed.”

“If anyone has the balls to fill my pants, it’s you,” he says, a mock sneer spreading across his face.

“Just get yourself ready, *sir*, so we can make your pickup. Where are we going, again?” she says, trying to hide a smirk, despite being fairly unsettled at the proximity of the man who nearly slit her throat.

“We’re going to 83 League Street, Currajong District.”

“That’s a residential address.”

“I know it.”

“Why?” she asks.

“We’re picking someone up.”

“Who? Are they essential to the mission?”

“No. He’s my co-worker at the lab,” says Rennin.

“You’re making a friendly pickup in a military gunship?”

“If you need everything spelt out you don’t need to be converted into an android.”

“We don’t have time for this,” Mia says.

Rennin glances up at the sky again. “I gave him my word. It was just a verbal offer but, if he’s alive, I’m getting him out.”

“Must be a close friend.”

Rennin laughs, “No. Not exactly. Decent enough, but would never call me a friend.”

“Do you even know if he’s alive?”

“No.”

“You didn’t call him?”

“We’re on a citywide blackout and the little emergency power we have is reserved for the military. My skull isn’t of such a colossal density that picking up the phone escaped me.”

Mia’s expression is of disbelief, “You’re not seriously referring to a hand held? Do they still make those?”

Rennin closes his eyes, “Oh, Christ, don’t start.”

“A fucking hand held?”

“If you think I’m going to let someone install a goddamn phone into my skull you’re off your nut. Nothing’s getting put in my head.”

Mia laughs loudly, pointing to his artificial eye, “Clearly!”

“Like I had a choice for that one! You don’t know what the war was like, *everything* digital or electric was compromised. Everything recorded was doctored, we couldn’t rely on *anything*. We were back to handwritten fucking orders, running across trenches, half the time were targeting our own forces.”

“Did you send a carrier pigeon to your mate?”

Rennin is about to keep going when he manages to rein in his rapidly faltering temper. “One good thing about this fake eye is I see what you’re doing. Well played.”

“You really need to talk to a therapist.”

Rennin’s eyes widen, “Wait a second, if you’ve got a phone implant you can call him.”

Mia shakes her head, “All civvie communication is jammed. The servers are corrupted.”

“But military isn’t affected?”

“Not connected to the city grid, Rennin.”

“Then this entire conversation has been pointless. We need to get moving.”

“You’re fucked up,” Drake states, breaking his silence. His face folds as if to think through a difficult puzzle. Deciding, he winces. “You killed three soldiers, shot *anyone* Caufmann told you to, nearly cut Mia’s throat for recognising the gun you took…” he shakes his head. “Then you save her by tying off her leg when she nearly bled out, saved a stranded trooper who was moments from death, and now you’re going to rescue someone, who is probably dead already, just because you ‘*told him you would*?’”

Rennin’s mouth smiles but the rest of his face remains passive. “I never killed any children. Those people I shot at the lab? That was my *job*. I saved that soldier because I can’t sit by and listen to someone fighting for their life when I was within reach. I’m going to try and save my co-worker, because people should keep their word.

“Lastly, out of all the people I’ve killed, the only one I would have regretted is Saker here. She at least can keep her shit together. If I’d killed her, I doubt your tiny mind would be able to handle it and you’d spend the rest of your life playing with crayons and eating Lego in a padded cell.” He pinches Drake’s cheek lightly, following it with a fond pat. “And I wouldn’t care.”

Drake’s face betrays his inner conflict. “I didn’t want to do it!”

“But you did. So don’t get on some moral high horse. Mia was on those kill squads, you don’t hear her whining.”

Drake shakes his head. “I…”

Mia takes a step forward, with a decidedly threatening demeanour for someone of such meagre frame compared to the former watchman. “Rennin, lay off.”

Rennin ignores her and locks his blazing eyes on the broken Beta HolinMech. “Listen, Drake, we’ve all done terrible things. That kid you killed may have been to put her out of her misery but you’ll never know if she was curable or not. Thinking about it will only drive you insane. The best you can do is pray that you shot straight and she

didn't feel anything.

"As for those three pieces of shit I took out, they were going to kill my Carla. If you have the right to kill people in their own home, then you have to be prepared to suffer the consequences of one of those people trying to defend their home by cutting the throat of the cunt trying to take away the person they love.

"You do what you feel you need to. If you can't handle it, kill yourself, but this barely passable female still seems to like you," he says breaking into a grin and slapping Drake on the shoulder.

Mia's disapproval is palpable. "You need a serious lesson in cheering people up,"

"I don't have a marine marshland of my own to envelop the firmness of his affection, I'm afraid, so I'll have to make do," Rennin quips, eliciting at least a huff out of Drake. "Hang on to those tattered remnants of self respect, tightly. All that has really happened to you is that the coddling you received as a child, that created your naïve concept of reality, has been stripped away. Whatever is left is yours, because you earned it."

Drake swallows and nods. "I think I'm starting to really understand you."

Rennin arches an eyebrow, "You mean there's more to me than meets the eye?"

"Don't get your hopes up, Optimus," says Mia before striking Rennin hard across the face, making him reel back in surprise.

"I thought we were past that," he says, attempting to dislodge the stars from his vision.

"You may have Thermosteel bones, but your brain shakes in that skull just fine," she smirks, shaking her hand to soothe the ache. "You killed three of my friends. While I may sympathise with your reasons, you don't get to call them pieces of shit in my presence."

"Noted."

Dead Star is fully loaded and refuelled by the time Rennin, Mia and Drake climb aboard. Del is busying himself preparing his Sunbreaker. Rennin swears that Del is taking the Suvaco emergence as a personal insult. Caufmann admitted to him earlier that Del was specifically designed to battle androids. Rennin believes that he's going to get his chance to try.

He sits down in the pilot's chair, with Caufmann for co-pilot. Stealing a sideward glance, he realises that the Doctor is wearing his black lab gear but his coat looks heavier somehow.

"What the hell is that made of? The latest in frontline scientific spandex?" Rennin asks, initiating lift off.

Caufmann is typing on his gauntlet but answers just the same. "This clothing is armour-weave mark twenty-one. Your oversized,

inefficient, military armour plating is mark five. This lab coat can stop a tank shell. I don't want to take any chances since the fight with Isfeohrad nearly left me immolated."

"Designed yourself?"

"Of course," says the doctor.

"Got a spare for me?"

"You're not strong enough to wear my clothes."

Rennin banks Dead Star left. "Alright, setting in for Currajong District."

"Negative. That will have to wait. We have an immediate Suvaco engagement," says Caufmann.

"Yes, sir. Understood."

"The Suvaco unit is attacking Corporal Verge's position near to the strike zone bordering on Simulacrum, Brighthelm and Blackhaven Districts," says Caufmann.

"*Corporal* Verge? Not a captain or commander? Or even a lieutenant?"

"Corporal Verge is the highest ranked survivor."

"How hard did that Suvaco hit them?"

"There is an immense amount of contaminant activity in that area yet there's a central point in Blackhaven where there is no activity at all. This is not a coincidence, Rennin. Something important is happening in Blackhaven. It should be swarming with contaminants, but it isn't. Horizon Military have Desolator 1 almost in position but a blockbuster strike isn't going to cut it."

"Why?"

"There's nothing on the surface. It would appear they're coordinating. Though the intelligence level is dropping sharply, just like I predicted."

Rennin isn't sure where Caufmann's going with this. "What are you thinking?"

"Blackhaven should be inundated with masses of contaminants given their numbers in the surrounding areas, but the zone is curiously empty. They're losing their cognitive functions, though this evidence would indicate that they're being directed," says Caufmann.

"By what?"

Caufmann ignores him. "The infected become obedient at the expense of their intellect; think of it as degenerative atelomorphosis," the doctor says.

"Atelo-what?"

Caufmann ignores him. "And the further their sentience deteriorates the more obedient they become."

"And they will continue deteriorating?"

Caufmann nods, "At an accelerated rate."

"And that's expected?"

"Controlling an intelligent population is exceedingly difficult. It's easy enough to influence people but sooner or later they'll make their own decisions regardless of what you say. I suppose it's just the human condition that it gets bored easily and constantly looks for a better offer for anything, everything.

"Recently infected seem to be much more capable of complex thoughts and even subterfuge for a short while so the infection is most dangerous early on but that is where it's fragile. There's only a small window of opportunity for them to utilise their minds to gain an advantage," says Caufmann.

"After that it's all downhill?"

"That's right."

"What if we holed up somewhere and just waited it out?"

"How long do we wait? Until it spreads to the borders of Australia and beyond? Until it's global?"

"But you said we're already going to lose the city so it'll spread anyway."

"We've *lost* the city, Rennin."

"Then what are we doing here? We should glass it and be done with it."

"There is far too much we don't know. This fight will never be won through weapons. We can slaughter every last one of them, and it won't make the slightest difference because we don't know where or how it started. Knowledge is what we need, as much of it as we can get. Make no mistake, this is ground zero for an extinction level pandemic."

Rennin is not surprised, but the conversation does absolutely nothing to improve his outlook on the whole situation.

Dead Star is joined in the sky by other gunships, Genome among them, and almost a dozen others. The former watchman eyes the Genome gunship for a few moments wondering how the pilot is holding up after the suicide of the only other survivor from Clone Unit.

Launching a volley of missiles won't do much to help a loss like that.

Rennin is about to ask why there are so many following their heading when Commander Croft comes over the radio announcing their orders. Raston Squad are going to engage the Suvaco android north of Blackhaven, within the Brighthelm District.

Croft goes on to give the other gunships their deployment points. Most of them are being told to reinforce the blockade forces that are under heavy assault.

Del is perfectly still but Rennin can see his jaw clenching and unclenching. The night is moving towards morning and the horizon is

just starting to lighten with the false dawn. Desolator 1 can be seen several kilometres ahead.

Rennin heads straight for it.

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Sindaris Tessol is walking so slowly through the underground passage that he doesn't even feel like he's moving. Crowds of contaminants are meandering all over the area, crawling, biting and dragging themselves from one place to another. Sindaris keeps his hood well over his face to conceal his eyes but the ones around him are little more than animals and don't take much notice of him.

Some of them are so advanced in their mutation that they barely resemble the human beings they once were. Their skin has turned black, their eyes too. Their hands have become like claws, ending in long hooks capable of gripping into walls. Their mouths have split vertically as well as their original horizontal alignment and the maw that was once a normal mouth is full of teeth that can tear a fist sized chunk of flesh out of a human in one quick bite. But those ones are nothing more than feeding and killing machines, completely incapable of any complex thought.

Sindaris can't feel even a hint of mood from them, only a constant nagging hunger. But he is very sure of hiding his thoughts and his name behind his own feigned hunger. He is worried they will try to make him eat with them or offer up a share of whatever poor soul they've found and killed, but they don't. The contaminants don't share food under any circumstances. The faster they eat, the faster they mutate. They become stronger, faster, and deadlier but their mental state regresses all the more quickly.

Every now and then he hears a scream for help. It uses all his self-control to stop himself responding and takes his full focus to continually mentally project the ice he feels around his heart. It is only Screamers, after all.

Please just be Screamers.

Sindaris has since learned that they are not contaminants placing clever traps but a mere offshoot mutation not so different from himself. It seems that these particular offshoots of infection don't react very well at all. They are infected in any of the usual manners but their bodies react so strongly to the virus that it kills them before it can develop the parasite correctly. Though after death the virus still brings them back, but as a primal ruin of a sentient being. They seem only capable of hysterically screeching the last thing they said when they were still alive. Some Screamers just run in circles, most called

for help since infection is usually caused by some kind of attack. Or they act out whatever action was their last.

A Screamer is running back and forth in front of Sindaris now with dead white eyes staring into nothing but the phantasmal hallucination brought on by the last tethers of electrical current in its mind. All it keeps saying over and over again is: '*What's that?*' over and over. Frantically. The look on its face is distorted by the full weight of fear.

The contaminants do not set traps, they just wait nearby to the Screamers knowing that someone will come to check out the noise sooner or later. An ambush of convenience, nothing more.

Sindaris can feel thousands of minds a little further up the corridor, all waiting for something. The entity. It is here, or at least it's going to be. Whatever it is. If Sindaris can kill it, the military forces might have a chance against this horrific plague.

Contaminants are slowly streaming up the dark passages to fill some kind of reservoir. The sheer volume of contaminants in this one space is astounding. He dips his head and follows behind a few of them, making sure to keep the feeling of hunger strong in his mind.

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Rennin is daydreaming about the past as Dead Star sails through the darkening sky en route to the Suvaco's location.

Logan, Childes and Gilles aren't the only soldiers that Rennin has killed that were considered to be on his side. Years ago there were a few others. Rennin joined the CryoZaiyon War for revenge. As far as he was concerned at that time, he was on his own side. Anyone facing off against the Gorai Aurelia was good enough to throw his lot in with.

In Rennin's opinion, some people just shouldn't be alive. Across the battlefields he'd stumbled across several of his own men whom decided that they weren't going to abide by certain rules regarding captured opposition forces. Not that Rennin cared much for them. Though when some of them victimised civilians that became a very different story.

Rennin can't stand pack mentality. He still has a difficult time coming to terms with the amount of civilians that died. The ratio of civilian deaths versus military losses was staggering and that fuelled the rage that burned inside him when his own troops mistreated the people they're supposed to be fighting for. It is horrible what some people become when there's no one around to enforce the rules.

Monkeys with guns.

Rennin did not stand by idly at such times. Sometimes a simple battering would let them know that just because there seems to be nothing to stop them, it doesn't mean they can do whatever they want.

Others just needed to die.

The first death Rennin was responsible for was via purposeful negligence when he failed to supply adequate sniper cover for a particular soldier. In the military, the mission takes precedence over all. For Rennin it's the principle, not the mission. He didn't leave him to die outright, he just missed a few shots he'd normally have nailed every time.

Because of the poor sniper cover the soldier was hit by flechettes in the abdomen. From Rennin's vantage point his death was messy. It also looked agonising. *Good.*

He's brought back to the present when the COM in Dead Star beeps indicating they are directly over the landing zone. Rennin takes Dead Star to the ground.

Del is straight out of the gunship with his rifle in hand. The android's teeth are extended and gritted together. Caufmann is instantly out after his creation and the others follow behind. Rennin remains behind to pilot the craft. Carmine stays with him, manning the gun.

Del is running towards the Suvaco feeling a desperate need to kill this invading android. Something inside his mind is being invaded by the intruders' system. The signal has been gradually strengthening as Dead Star approached the Suvaco's position. His attempts to tell Caufmann were dismissed, and his attempts to tell Rennin at the stadium were even more unsuccessful; the former watchman didn't seem to possess a system capable of receiving Del's text.

The signal is trying to force him into obeying a series of cunningly deceptive commands designed to alter his 'protect' and 'destroy' protocols. Effectively someone is trying to remotely rewrite his mind. Del, doing his own calculations, believes that the signal is at peak strength as long as most of the units are active, as if their very bodies amplify the transmission. Although Del is confidently ignoring the rewrites he has arrived at only one viable solution to keep his mind his own: kill them all. Any Suvaco unit not disassembled is now Del's enemy.

The blind android reaches an intersection. Del's sensors are telling him the Suvaco unit is just around the corner so he turns left at full sprint grunting, feeling his lungs opening up for the first time taking in huge breaths of air to power his frame.

Drej and Antares are trying to keep up, but Del's speed eclipses even their efforts. He bursts around the corner, sending a powerful

sonar pulse outwards. The shape of the Suvaco emerges. Del instantly recognises that it's fully armoured and aware of his presence.

The Suvaco structure is similar to Del but its frame is more heavyset and a helmet with shining red eyes conceals its head. A rocket sails towards him but Del, moving so quickly, seems to flicker to the side, allowing the shot to pass and blow up behind him.

Del's composure isn't even dented. He chambers a round in his bolt-action rifle, charges the photon round and takes aim. Another rocket leaves the Suvaco's weapon but Del remains still long enough to take his shot. Drej and Antares just make it around the corner to be greeted with an incredibly loud thunderclap and a dust cloud in the face due to the backlash of Del's Sunbreaker.

The beam hits the Suvaco in the chest with an impact so severe it is thrown it off its feet, crashing to the ground. Del almost casually steps aside letting the next rocket zip past, reloading his rifle in one smooth motion.

Unhindered by the dust cloud he fires again while the Suvaco attempts to regain its feet. The thunderclap sends another burst of dust as the shot hits its right knee, sending its body into a somersault. Del drops the rifle and is over at the wounded hulk in an instant.

Caufmann can't believe what he's seeing; a week ago he could barely function and now he's in battle. He urges Del to exercise caution but the doctor doesn't understand the mental disease that's trying to invade his mind, and the urgency required to end it.

Del lets out a roar and slams his foot onto the Suvaco's head, deforming the helmet inwards. The creature scrambles to a crouch and manages to shove Del away momentarily as it tries to rise. Purplish blood runs out of the base of his helmet, leaking from the partially crushed face underneath.

Del presses his advantage, kicking from the hip to crumple the helmet even further, sending the Suvaco falling onto its back. Del wastes no time. He reaches down and grips the android by the neck. Despite his smaller stature, Del lifts the creature with ease until it's at eye level. Though Del has no eyes he makes sure this thing gets a good long look at him. Then, with a flick of his wrists, Del severs the spinal column by breaking the Suvaco's neck at right angles before dropping the corpse.

Rennin hears the rockets explode and soon afterwards the Suvaco transponder reading disappears from his monitor. Rennin is surprised that it took so little time, and that Del took absolutely no damage.

Barely any energy was recorded expelling from his system.

A moment later, Caufmann is on the radio. The doctor advises they're on their way back. Rennin allows himself to slip into daydreams again. He may as well let his guard down a little since Carmine is scanning the streets with the gunship-mounted side cannon, holding onto it like it's his mother and he's just had a horrible dream.

The man Rennin let die during the war crosses Rennin's mind again. Corporal Crane. He tries to think back to what started his flashback earlier. But try as he might he can't remember what he was brooding on beforehand.

It was something to do with something to do with some other thing that Rennin couldn't remember at the time. *Sense makes, Rennin, sense makes.*

The crew pile back into Dead Star and Rennin drags his tired mind back to the task at hand and lifts off vertically. He overhears grumbles from the coterie behind him, as a few fall over with the rest of the team staggering for their seats.

"Jesus, Ren, you think you could waited a sec?" asks Drake.

A call comes over the radio, "Dead Star, this is Commander Croft."

"I read you," says Rennin.

"A massive android has joined the siege on Corporal Verge's position."

"A Suvaco?"

"You're aware of the chassis type?"

Rennin glances to Caufmann, who nods for him to answer the commander. "Yes, sir."

"Is this a private channel?"

"Need it to be?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

Rennin shrugs to Caufmann, then taps the console loudly pretending to patch the audio to his headset. "It's private, sir."

"Is that 'Del' thing with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Caufmann is too then?"

"Affirm."

"I need you to get to Verge's position and pull the survivors out. Then I want you to take Caufmann into custody and disable the Del android."

That catches Rennin completely off guard. "Say again?"

"Is there something you didn't understand, Sergeant?"

"They've been indispensable so far, I'm having trouble getting my head around your logic."

“The Suvaco androids are from the lab. After the explosion there two days ago the infection rate went off the charts. I don’t find these to be coincidences.

Prototype’s damn NAPA bombs.

“I want Del deactivated and disassembled at your convenience, and Caufmann taken into custody pending a trial when you put down at Whitechapel.”

“But, sir—”

“Is that understood?” Croft booms.

Rennin takes a breath and looks at Caufmann’s reflection in the view port. The doctor shows no response. He continues to type on his gauntlet, probably to Del. Rennin speaks. “Wilco, sir.”

“Good,” says Croft. “You worked with Doctor Caufmann at the lab, is that correct?”

Rennin is already dreading what’s going through Caufmann’s mind right now. “Yes, sir.”

“You served with androids early in your career?”

One way of putting it. “Yes.”

“Then your lieutenant will need all the information you can provide in taking down androids. Is *that* understood?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Out,” says Croft, ending the transmission.

Rennin closes off the monitor and makes sure all communication channels are disabled before slowly turning to face Caufmann who is already looking at him. Rennin’s eyes flicker to Del but the great android is perfectly still.

“That went well,” he shrugs.

The corners of Caufmann’s mouth turn up in that unsettling smile of his. “Regret letting us hear all that?”

“No,” Rennin answers, looking to Sabre. “Are we going to have a problem?”

Del visibly tenses.

The tension in the air is paramount before Sabre answers. “If it wasn’t for Del, we would never have held them at the stadium. I owe my life to it, and by extension the man who built it.”

“Anyone here feel like following that order?”

Most shake their heads. Mia and Jawa remain still, but voice no complaints. Drake turns to Rennin.

“What the hell is going on? Why do they want us to kill Del and arrest Caufmann?”

Rennin shrugs. “Why you asking me? I heard what you heard.”

Caufmann gives Sabre an appraising look. “Do you know why you were given callsigns instead of using your names?”

Sabre moves self-consciously in his seat, obviously uncomfortable

in talking to Caufmann. “They told us it was to differentiate between ground troops and gunship crews.”

Caufmann’s eyes remain fixed on him for a moment. “They gave you callsigns because everything sent over radio waves is recorded. Rennin aerially bombed nearly a dozen buildings defending the stadium to route the contaminants. How many uninfected survivors were hiding in those buildings, I wonder?” he says, tapping the side of his head.

“How can anyone know that?”

“If this city is won, there will be people going through every building room by room or pile of rubble turning over every piece of debris, what do you think they’ll find? Who will be blamed *when* they find, what your kind call, ‘collateral damage’?”

Rennin laughs, “They’ll blame you, Doc, don’t kid yourself.”

“I kill with purpose, not missiles.”

Rennin turns to face him from the pilot seat. “You actually think of this as back-burning a bushfire, don’t you?”

Caufmann inclines his head. “An appropriate metaphor.”

“Just for the record,” says Rennin turning back to gaze over the city, “I think you’re a monster.”

“Will you find comfort in that when you’re back on my operating table?”

Rennin tries to suppress a shiver. “I was joking.”

“On my operating table you’re my patient, not my experiment,” he says, inwardly weighing up how true it is. The mild experimental surgery was only to help him, anyway.

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In Whitechapel District the fortified area is well and truly just that. A huge perimeter fence has been constructed out of steel and concrete pylons, punctuated every fifty metres by a turret on the top of a small tower manned by two gunners. The area it protects contains several skyscrapers, where the immunized people are protected with a massive percentage of the remaining Horizon Military.

On ground level, a mobile construct sits occupied by Commander Jorge Croft, the man assigned with responsibility for the Raddocks Horizon crisis. He has a medium build and stands at 5’10” but his entire stance and bearing proclaims leadership. His shimmering black eyes are wide and almost impossible to look away from once he’s locked his gaze with yours. He’s pacing back and forth in front of a screen playing footage on repeat of the lab after Isfeohrad’s escape and detonation of the NAPA bomb. He shakes his head furiously.

“That bastard knew this progenitor-class was loose, he didn’t say anything,” he mutters.

The only other person in the command post is First Officer Grace Hannon, who attempts to hide her discomfort with Croft at the best of times. “Can I speak freely here, sir?”

“Of course.”

“Doctor Caufmann developed the vaccine and the antigen, I’m not sure charging him with treason will hold up. It’s commonly known already that without his android, the stadium would have fallen.”

“Have you seen the Suvaco units? Their resemblance to Del is too close to dismiss. The armour plating around the chest and shoulders is grown, not implanted, and they are almost identical at first glance.”

“It has been confirmed that Del killed a Suvaco unit barely fifteen minutes ago. Rumours have spread that the progenitor-class was crippled by it moments before the lab exploded,” says Hannon.

“All of this is connected, like a spider’s web, and I don’t trust the doctor or his android. There are too many androids in town and they’re all as bad as each other, no matter which side they’re on.”

Hannon takes a slow steadying breath. “What will Caufmann do if we kill Del and he escapes?”

Croft ponders that for a moment. “Can he do any worse than what he’s already done here?”

“I still don’t think he would have spent so much time working up a treatment if he released it in the first place.”

“He wouldn’t be the first doctor to do such a thing. Godyssey can expect a huge increase in public funding if Caufmann comes out of this like the proverbial knight in shining armour,” says Croft.

“This is a Godyssey mega-city, he could have chosen anywhere to release it.”

“A Godyssey city contaminated and overrun by its own inhabitants hits pretty fucking close to home, wouldn’t you say?” says Croft, wide-eyed.

“Let’s call in the Alpha HolinMechs.”

“*More* androids is the *last* thing we want here.”

“Yes, sir…” she says not sounding convinced at all. “Why do you keep watching the footage of the lab blowing up?”

“I’ve watched it a hundred times and since then everything has gone straight to hell. The lab explodes and the an infection turns into a warzone. *That* is not a coincidence.”

“What if Dead Star doesn’t come to Whitechapel after pulling out Verge’s unit?”

“Desolator 1 is in range.”

She nods and returns to her monitor where an incoming transmission registers. “Sir, we have a call coming in from an

unknown origin," she frowns.

"Put it on the screen."

An image flickers into view of a pale face surrounded by a flow of long, jet-black hair that shimmers silver with every movement. The eyes are silver grey and almost reflective with lips tinted purple as if stained by some kind of soup. It's an unsettling appearance. "Commander Croft," its voice grinds out, sounding like glass over gravel.

Croft isn't a fool, he knows what he's talking to. "Progenitor-class android, serial number double-oh zero one. What can I do for you?"

"I have a program that will aid in the disablement of Caufmann's forerunner," it says.

The commander feels his spine tingle. "You can hear us."

"I hear everything and what I hear, what I see, the ones behind my mind can see."

Croft swallows and ignores the frightened glance of Hannon. "You are going to give me a program, you said?"

"I already have. Look in your private file. It will take care of the blind android."

"You mean Del."

"That name is just a name. It is a forerunner, merely the first of a legion. You will make an example of it, and its maker."

"Who do you think you are to order me to do *anything?*"

"Since you are isolated and quarantined you have no contact with your superiors, who would certainly not want to assume responsibility of how you have handled this incident, and I am a Godyssey construct. Therefore, for the purpose of this conversation, I *am* Godyssey."

"What do you want?"

"I want you to get the forerunner in range of that program's signal, and to execute William Caufmann."

"He's en route here in a gunship and Del will be taken out in the field."

The mockery of human likeness on the screen smiles lightly. "It will not be. I have already done most of the work for you, causing the city wide black out, and destroying the laboratory. Caufmann is exposed."

"Where did you get this program, and how do you know it will work on Del?"

"I was logistics and tactics for a military division you will never know of. I have access, or can gain access, to any information ever so much as written down if given enough time. I disabled an entire city and military guidance system; a small program such as that was a simple stratagem. If you do not do as I say I will show you just how much more I will do. I am a machine. I think in Ones and Zeroes. You

do as I say and that will read in my mind as One. On. Active. Positive. Done. If you refuse I will read it as Zero. Off. Dead. Negative. Undone. If I arrive at result One, so do your guidance systems. If I arrive at result Zero, so will you, am I understood?"

Croft frowns and thinks for a moment. "We could take back the city with guidance systems up and running…"

"If you hurry," says the prototype's harshly inhuman voice, ending the transmission.

Hannon checks the signal but the source has completely disappeared. She opens up Croft's file. "The progenitor has uploaded a file into our systems."

Croft wipes a disturbing amount of sweat from his brow. "Does it have a filename or just a bunch of numbers?"

She has a very bad feeling when she reads the name. "It's called Harvest, sir."

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Sindaris Tessol enters the reservoir where thousands of contaminants are packed in like sardines. Despite the contaminant masses almost swarming over each other, Sindaris' attention is strongly drawn to the one vacant area over the far side. A mist of light shrouds it in a perfect cylinder, reaching far above the crowd. Sindaris knows it must be an image projected into his perception. Attempting to blink it away only allows his eyes to see the mist evaporate for the smallest instant before flashing back into existence. He can feel a prickling sensation all over his head but puts that with the rest of his thoughts, as far away as possible.

The contaminants' combined feeling of hunger is pressing on his mind so very heavily now. Though there are no lights in the reservoir, it begins to inexplicably become brighter. Sindaris finds himself squinting as the very air seems to glow before him, yet there are still no exact points of real light. A feeling of silence, of waiting, starts to spread over the crowd. The sensation is so intense that Sindaris almost feels his very consciousness slip away from him. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath to steady himself, trying to ignore the feeling of his bones pressing against his skin from within.

When he opens his eyes again, the reservoir is darkening again and the spiralling mist cylinder is settling into a humanoid profile. Sindaris joins the crowd and starts to weave through them, moving towards the front, carefully keeping any thoughts of the gun in his sleeve at bay. The minds of the others are all blank now, even the hunger is suppressed.

Sindaris keeps his head down, gradually closing the distance to the glowing mist, trying his best not to look at it. The prickling feeling across the top of his head feels as if his hair is moving about on its own. He keeps moving through the contaminants, shoving some aside if he has to, but avoiding contact as best as he can. Eventually the mass of locals stop moving altogether so Sindaris does as well. The mist spiral is close enough to spit at. He waits.

Slowly, as the gaseous shape continues to shrink, the figure becomes increasingly corporeal. Sindaris tries not to focus on it too closely, but his hands are shaking no matter how slow and steady he makes each breath.

A wave of euphoria passes over the entire reservoir gathering that has such a force that Sindaris is temporarily blinded. He has to fight to stop himself blacking out and the only thing he can think of doing is letting his face hang limp since it's what he imagines the others are doing.

Their minds begin to quieten again and as they do, the prickling sensation returns to Sindaris' ears. He resists the urge to shake his head to clear his eyes.

The mist spiral has dissipated completely leaving an entirely white human shaped figure that looks as if it is comprised solely of light itself. The figure soon begins to dim and when Sindaris' vision clears up he finds himself looking at the face of the controlling entity.

His wife.

Sindaris experiences shock on such a scale that he doesn't react. Everything in him goes quiet, he can't feel his body or even the soft warm buzz of the infection coursing through his being. His wife looks just as she did on their wedding day. Sindaris' numb shock dissolves the mental walls that defend him, no longer blocking the thousands of infected minds sharing the ecstasy of purpose.

Before Sindaris even feels anything is wrong, he's already lost half his identity to the invading share-mind. A barely audible whimper escapes his mouth as he makes a fruitless attempt to grip the fraying strings of his mind, grasping at anything that will keep his identity from vanishing like a single drop of water into a thundering river.

It happens too fast, there is simply nothing left to keep him fighting. Sindaris is only a primeval version of himself looking into the eyes of his wife. He feels himself beginning to smile. The euphoria carries such weight that within a second he doesn't even want to do anything else but stand there. His binary pupils dilate. He now doesn't even remember his name.

After another moment, he doesn't remember who he's looking at but she makes him happy. He can feel the other minds' eyes slithering around in his head bringing him in, accepting him. Making him part

of something special.

He is home.

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Unaware of the assembly of infected right below the surface at his position, Rennin Farrow banks Dead Star in a ring around a brutal ground fight. He's made three passes, but still cannot see a viable landing site. Assisting Corporal Verge's remnant seems increasingly unlikely since he is sure that as soon as he sets down the ship will be swarmed upon.

Verge's unit has abandoned their initial position at a four-way intersection, retreating into one of the nearby buildings. Rennin can see flashes from gunfire from the windows. One soldier peers out and up, seeing Dead Star. He points up. Since nothing is coming through on the radio, Rennin figures that means they're heading to the roof.

The streets are teeming with contaminants, moving in a vile torrent, invading the building in any way possible. Upon reaching the rooftop there are five of Verge's unit remaining. One of them is limping from what appears to be a grievous leg wound.

Carmine opens fire from Dead Star's side cannon to stem the tide of contaminants on the street. Rennin turns to Del. "Get your Sunbreaker out and give them a hand, I'm taking us in."

Sabre draws his attention away from the fight. "We have to do this quickly."

A soldier runs to the edge of the building holding a rocket launcher. An RPG is unloaded into the street, killing a cluster of the crazed locals. The soldier then drops the empty rocket launcher and the group takes up a position training their rifles on the door, awaiting the first rush of contaminants.

"Only one of this bucket's cannons will be able to face the fight as I come in. Carmine will have to keep sustained fire on the ground," says Rennin.

Caufmann looks at Mia. "You and Del will assist Carmine with sniper fire."

"Rennin, keep the gunship's left side facing the main attack. Drej, once we're low enough, we'll jump out and protect the survivors," Antares says.

Without warning, the access to the roof explodes with contaminants like ants escaping a flooded hive. The survivors of Verge's contingent are taken completely by surprise by the sheer numbers of raging infected. Two more of Verge's team are killed within seconds.

Rennin drops Dead Star down and their rescue begins. The first shot comes from Del's Sunbreaker and a contaminant is blown clean in half as the thunderclap rings inside the gunship.

Carmine fires a volley of rounds across the charging horde, causing some to stumble and others to scatter. Mia fires at the ones leading the charge trying to make them fall to slow the growing mass behind.

Rennin lowers the gunship further and the two androids leap out with swords in hand. Drej hits the ground first, cracking the stone surface whereas Antares drops and rolls more gracefully, then the two are up and running side by side.

Drej's sword seems to glow silver as he begins to exert himself. Antares' blade's etchings light up green, as do the veins on her bare arms. The two of them charge at a crowd of attackers that now number in the dozens. The first contaminant is decapitated by Drej's bone-blade and their rear guard struggle is underway.

Rennin sets Dead Star as close as he can to Verge's last stand. Carmine tries to aid the androids as much as he can from his vantage point.

Del snap fires two shots almost as fast as the light beams themselves and both shots result in definite kills. Mia is crippling every target she can, aiming for every knee in sight.

The three remaining ground survivors are now only two, Corporal Verge and one gunner. Rennin doesn't need to make any movement to signal them, they abandon their positions and run towards the gunship.

Antares and Drej get overrun by a sea of them; they could make it to the roof access to bottleneck them in time. The gunner is run down by a group of contaminants. Verge shoots the slashing, biting locals off the overwhelmed comrade. The corporal gets under the arm of the wounded soldier and hauls him towards Dead Star.

Rennin patches his headset through to the speaker on the outside of the gunship, "Let's move it, Arca!"

Drej and Antares are swamped by contaminants now, fighting back to back. A gap opens up in their defence and a contaminant thrusts its forearm spike towards Drej's side but a Sunbreaker round blares through its torso, taking its top section apart.

The two androids make a break for Dead Star. Antares is stabbed in the thigh by a diving contaminant, her sub zero blood freezing the creature's limb. With a fierce downward hit, she breaks its frozen arm straight off. The thing screeches in pain and a bullet shot into its mouth kills it instantly. Antares rips the curious spike from her leg and doesn't even flinch.

Drej turns to the onrush of contaminants and outstretches his

hands. Focussing his raw core power, a blast of red energy streams outwards, incinerating a pack of them on the spot. He then boards Dead Star. Verge has slung in and secured the badly bleeding gunner.

The fully loaded Dead Star lifts off the ground, away from the massing swarms of screaming contaminants.

Antares removes her armour plate and rips her pant leg open, revealing her impaled limb. It hisses cold steam, fogging up the cabin and forcing the humans to cover their mouths to avoid inhaling the dangerous vapour. She jabs herself with a small syringe and the steaming wound sparks before sealing over.

Verge's gunner bleeds out while Mia is desperately trying to tend his horrific lacerations. The corporal's shoulders sag.

"Fifty men," the corporal bursts out, ripping off the encumbering helmet to reveal long blonde hair plaited to her scalp. She locks her icy grey eyes on Sabre when she sees his lieutenant stripes. "We called for reinforcements *yesterday*! Where the fuck was our support? One platoon holding the Blackhaven Red Zone?"

"There aren't any," says Sabre simply.

Verge points to Antares hissing leg. "You have a CryoZaiyon and my company didn't get so much as *one* man?"

"In this gunship are the remains of two crews and the Raston taskforce. Believe me when I say that there are *no* reinforcements," he says slowly to let it sink in. "Now, where is the rest of your platoon? Where's Major Sikes?"

"Where the fuck do you think?"

"Corporal!" Sabre says chidingly.

Rennin isn't sure why he's surprised to see that Corporal Verge is female but he's surprised all the same. Though he likes her attitude. Verge salutes Sabre exhaustedly. "Corporal Celina Verge locked and loaded, *lieutenant*," she says eyeing Antares.

Sabre inclines his head but doesn't salute. "I won't mince words, corporal, this is a desertion; not a retreat."

That gets her attention. "Sir?"

"In this gunship we have an AWOL HolinMech, a dead CryoZaiyon, and combat-grade android that command wants killed and Doctor Caufmann who Commander Croft wants in custody."

"I heard that thing held the line at the stadium before we lost contact with everyone," Verge says, glancing at Del.

"That thing saved our lives too so you have a choice to make. Either you get dropped off at one of our positions, or you're coming with us. We think Croft has lost it. Communication outside the city is jammed completely and he's calling the shots on his own."

Verge's pale eyes don't blink. "I'll get dropped off with my gunner if it's all the same to you. You pulled me out of that mess so I won't

say anything to incriminate you but I'm not abandoning my troops."

"We're not keeping this in here. He might reanimate," interjects Mia, before pushing the body out a small hatch at the rear with an angry grunt.

Verge is about to shout at Mia but is interrupted by Rennin calling back from the pilot's seat. "You're not getting dropped anywhere. I have a stopover to make in Currajong District."

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In Whitechapel, Commander Croft and First Officer Hannon are tracking Dead Star's transponder. As Rennin banks towards Currajong, Croft's face turns venomous. "Deserting…" he spits.

"He has clearly veered off course," she concedes.

"Have our tech experts discovered what this program will do to Del once uploaded?"

"It'll adjust his targeting parameters to attack Thermosteel constructs and not to recognise command of any kind. Also it will force it to attack any viable threat on sight."

"Androids…" Croft smiles. "This is good news."

"What's our course of action, sir?"

"Dead Star has disobeyed a direct order to come straight here after pulling Verge out. Signal Desolator 1 to fire on them. Immediately."

"Desolator 1 is out of position, it will have to be realigned and fire on an angle."

"And?"

"The particle beam of a Desolator satellite will cut a trench across its axis. The shockwave leaving the beam at forty-five degrees will cause a lot of collateral damage. It might even affect the Skyhook station. Corporal Verge is on that gunship."

"There's more at stake here than a few soldiers and a gunship! I want them taken out. Now!" he bellows.

Hannon takes a breath. "And the program?"

"Imbed a signal when Desolator 1 targets them. When the array focuses, the signal will be received by Del's sensors, automatically overwriting his existing operating parameters."

"Why bother?"

"If that thing is half the fighting machine I've heard it is, it'll probably live. If it survives, it'll be ours."

14.
AWOL

Gunship Dead Star enters Currajong District as a fierce storm is setting in. Currajong is a residential suburb in Middle-city that isn't riddled with apartment complexes in massive neo-gothic structures as they in Centre-city. It's a throwback to times gone by, when houses were built on blocks of land instead of mega-buildings with miniature caskets with a television for homes as they were in the 22nd century. As such it's easier to see contaminant activity, or the lack thereof as the case is now.

Rennin makes a beeline for Wanker's address, oblivious to the Desolator satellite's reorientation as it begins moving into position behind them. The hulking station is slow to target the one small shuttle. Desolator satellites are designed to fire directly downwards as precision blockbusters, not to target moving objects.

The former watchman brings Dead Star down on the front lawn of the house. It has been rather aggressively overgrown by vines in an apt metaphor for how this city is being overrun. Then again, to most the city may have fallen long before anyone knew even knew the vines were present.

Del is first out of the craft and absently blasts a contaminant off of the roof of Wanker's house. The shot divides the target into pieces. Rennin is out of the pilot's chair and out of the craft.

"Wayne!" he calls, then turns to Del. "Try to keep it down."

Acknowledged, appears in Rennin's artificial eye in minute text he can barely read.

Rennin nods and is about to proceed up to the doorstep when he stops and narrows his eyes at Del, "Was that sarcasm?"

Del doesn't respond.

"It was," says Rennin inwardly swearing at himself for not realising he can open text channels locally by mere thought and timing his blinking.

What else can this thing do?

Del ignores him and pans the gun around, alert and clearly on guard.

Jawa calls out of the craft. "Come on, man, hurry!"

Rennin runs to the front door, bashing on it with both fists. "Wayne! It's Rennin. Open up."

No answer.

Rennin thumps again. "Goddamn it, Wanker, open this fucking door! I *will* kick it in and drag you onto this gunship."

Another moment of silence, before the door opens just a crack and a trembling voice can be heard. “Rennin? What—”

The door is promptly kicked open before he can finish his query. Rennin steps in. “Ready?”

Wayne Carr stumbles back against the opposite wall. “Ready? What for?”

“I told you, we’re leaving.”

Moments later Wayne is ushering two children and his wife out of the house towards the gunship. He face is haggard and he probably hasn’t slept since the fighting started. Thinking of the fighting, Rennin turns and glances towards Centre-city where detonations can be seen reflecting against the clouds in the sky.

Rennin follows Wayne feeling an increasingly unsettling sensation of being watched. “Hey, I thought you had four kids…” Rennin starts as his eyes scan up the fascia of Wayne’s house. At the top there’s an attic window where the faces of two children are staring right at Rennin with white eyes. Rennin huffs a curse as a full body shudder stutters his step.

Rennin turns back to the gunship with gritted teeth, wishing he hadn’t asked. The remainder of the family are making a concerted effort to look anywhere but at their house. Even the former watchman feels part of his mind pulling his glance back. He can’t stand those creatures.

He fastens himself back into the pilot’s chair and lifts off. Rennin wonders how Wayne’s children became infected, and how long they’ve been locked in the attic. The thought nags at him. Would it have made any difference if he arrived earlier; could they have been saved?

Rennin grinds his teeth together when he thinks of whoever released this disastrous affliction.

Not too long ago he was happy enough to let the world burn. Mostly he still is, but now there are some people he wants to keep alive. He’s not entirely sure whether he actually wants them to live or if he just doesn’t want to feel a sense of defeat at having someone in his ‘care’ taken from him.

The interior of the cockpit suddenly turns red. Rennin checks over the instrument panel reflexively looking for the system error, but all the boards are green. He looks out the cockpit and finds that the glow coming from outside.

Caufmann snaps out a warning. “Rennin, Desolator 1 is locked on.”

“What the hell is going on?” asks Corporal Verge.

“Get us out of here,” yells Sabre.

“It’s almost ready to fire, Rennin,” calls Caufmann as the gunship

begins to shudder mid-air.

Thinking fast Rennin begins a steep climb, taking Dead Star up towards the satellite, “I’m going to take us up high enough to shut the power down, it’ll lose us once we cut power.”

Signal detected. Priority: Evade. Priority: Evade, texts Del on Rennin’s screen.

“You’re going to do a freefall in a gunship, are you out of your mind?” calls Mia.

“No other option,” Rennin says, pushing the throttle to maximum. Dead Star’s engines roar, then screech as they are pushed to their limit. The steep ascent is driving the ship past tolerances.

Climb, you bastard!

“Hurry, Ren, I can’t hack into it!” yells Caufmann, typing frantically into his gauntlet.

Evade. Evade!

Rennin sees the updraft of wind pulled up by Desolator 1 as it stabilises the surrounding atmosphere for its blast. He swings around in his seat. “Del! Shoot the transponder!”

Del obeys instantly, pointing his built in wrist-gun straight at Drake’s crotch across from him. Drake opens his legs just as Del’s wrist-shot tears straight through Dead Star’s hull, obliterating the transponder unit.

Taking that as his cue, Rennin grabs both emergency shutdown levers above his head and pulls them down. Dead Star’s power cuts out instantly and begins a rolling descent—left wing first—as Desolator 1 opens fire. The red energy beam fires downwards at a forty-five degree angle, narrowly missing the falling gunship but viciously shaking it as it screams past.

All eyes are riveted forwards despite the almost blinding light. Caufmann is still typing into his gauntlet. Rennin has his eyes shut tight, counting out the few seconds he can allow Dead Star to freefall.

No one notices Del screaming. The gargantuan android is gripping the sides of his head, calling to Caufmann.

Rennin slams the levers back up restoring power to the engines and begins wrestling with the axis controls. He bellows out the loudest curse he can manage, but even that is inaudible over the roaring engines and the Desolator’s particle beam. He regains enough control to crudely straighten their descent. He doesn’t veer far from the blast trajectory, he follows it down, hoping that the beam will conceal the gunship.

The groundside impact of Desolator 1 is impossibly bright and Rennin averts his eyes banking Dead Star away from the site. With all the noise and desperation no one sees Del’s struggle at the rear of the gunship, they are all transfixed by the beam and it’s destructive path,

all eyes focused beyond the cockpit glass at what may be their last moments.

Embedded signal… Assistance required!

Help.

Help me.

HELP ME.

Oblivious to Del's messages, Rennin cuts across the blast radius at right angles, now barely a car height above street level. An alarm howls on the console indicating the rear hatch has been opened. A quick glance around confirms everyone is still in their seats.

He wants to double check, but wills himself to focus on flying. He hears Caufmann calling out to Del frantically and he realises that the great android was the only one he didn't see.

I can't think about that now.

He's just trying to keep Dead Star low and get them to a landing zone where they can assess their situation.

The ground is shaking. Dead Star is too, and all he can hear is the discharge that sounds like a roaring demon behind him. His heart is pumping so loudly it feels like his ears are popping with each beat but finally they're clear of the blast zone.

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Sindaris Tessol is knocked out of his wondrous—though temporary— elation by a single vicious cracking blast topside that shakes the very foundations of the reservoir. It isn't directly above, as the ceiling has not collapsed to crush the entire area and everything in it.

Nonetheless it's enough to scare the mass of contaminants, and in so doing it knocks Sindaris back to his senses. His identity and memories come flooding back in one fell swoop like a cup being filled. It almost feels like life returning to him or vision being restored after a long time in darkness. Sindaris remembers who he is and why he's here once again.

He looks at the entity controlling the contaminants but this time he's ready for the face of his wife. This is not the person he loved for most of his life, it is merely a mockery coming from his own mind. Others would be seeing people important to them in their mortal life, people who have enough sway in their subconscious to make them pliable.

The once simple construction worker seizes his chance, disregarding the risk to himself. He focuses on the entity and pulls the gun from his pocket. For a moment the image of his wife's beautiful

face fills his stomach with lead, but when he looks into her eyes he sees nothing he recognises of the woman he spent his life with.

A single shot rings out, hitting the entity in the right lobe, destroying that part of the head. The body lurches back and falls but Sindaris doesn't stay in place long enough to see it. He is gone, darting through the crowd, running for whatever life he leads now.

He feels random and panicked contaminant thoughts coursing through his head. Some of the smarter ones know what he did and they clamber towards him, clawing at him as he passes but the weight of the confusion caused by the masses makes their movements slow and inaccurate. Even though they are sluggish and overwhelmed, there are so many of them. Too many.

He feels a hand grab at his sleeve and slaps it aside. Another grabs at his ankle but it slips and fails to grasp. Fingers pass across his head and through his hair but he does not stop. He doesn't look at them, he just runs.

Finally he makes it out of the main reservoir area only to receive his first injury. A razor sharp wrist claw slashes across his back tearing his skin like paper. He looks up in shock at his assailant; one of the more advanced mutations, with black skin and an unrelenting hunger.

Sindaris stumbles and falls forwards onto his face. The thing comes at him and slashes downwards. Sindaris can only roll onto his back, raising his arms to protect himself. He feels instant agony as his arms are carved down to the bone with enough force to push him into the ground. The creature backs off and screeches at him. Somewhere through his pain Sindaris realises that the blow cut his skin easily, but failed to pass through his bones. The creature slashes again but Sindaris rolls to the side and onto his feet. He rushes up a side passage away from the creature as fast as his shaking legs will carry him.

He focuses all the mental power he can muster into a terrifying, all-consuming feeling of famine, picturing the jet-black skinned creature as the only food that will ease the pain of being so ravenous. He pushes the mood outwards like a cursed invisible wave. His own desperation reinforces the impulse, building in power as more of the contaminants around him turn their attentions toward his attacker. The urge to consume becomes so powerful that all the surrounding contaminants feel the starvation so strongly it eclipses all else.

They come running from all directions. They rush past Sindaris as if he's not even there. The torrent of contaminants charge maniacally for the congregations of those similar to his attacker, their numbers growing to satisfy their overwhelming hunger.

Sindaris hears the creatures screeching as they are being devoured by their own kind. The screams are bad, though they are only audible; he can feel each bite as if it is happening to him.

Suffering as his wounds throb and ooze, he realises blood loss is making him increasingly dizzy, but he forces himself to run as fast as his legs can carry him.

He makes it back to the streets of Blackhaven and disappears into the night, leaving the horde to tear each other to pieces.

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Rennin has Dead Star running in low power mode as he flies low over the Currajong district, maintaining thruster emissions at a minimum. Desolator 1 still looms overhead but since the transponder's destruction, it hasn't made a move. The satellite's particle beam has cut a three-kilometre gouge across the district, creating a burned scar that gapes obscenely amongst the houses on either side.

Rennin finds an overpass and brings Dead Star gently down under it. Lieutenant Sabre and Corporal Verge are first out of the craft, guns at the ready, efficiently securing the area.

Caufmann is next out and his face says it all. He's fuming. Rennin doesn't like his expression at all, and follows closely behind.

Out of the ship, Rennin is hit in the face with an icy cold wind and the sounds of rain. Raddocks Horizon rains a lot lately, he notes.

"William!" he calls.

Caufmann doesn't acknowledge the hail, his eyes are on the blast zone, heading towards Del's last known location.

Rennin sprints up and grabs his arm. "There's no reading on Del's location, he's gone silent."

"He's alive!" Caufmann twists his arm away, attempting to break away from Rennin's grasp but his artificial hand remains firmly locked on the doctor's forearm despite his shoulder nearly being torn from its socket.

"I believe you, he's alive, but during the Desolator strike there was a very sharp spike in secondary command channels. A signal calling itself '*Harvest*' was picked up by Dead Star's COM log."

"I have to find him," Caufmann says looking distraught. "Look at these messages," the doctor says showing Rennin his gauntlet screen, scrolling through pages of text. "Del was screaming for help."

Caufmann's hands are shaking so badly that Rennin can't read the messages clearly, but he gets the gist. Del has been reprogrammed. "He's gone. We'll have to come back for him."

"I'm not leaving him! I'm analysing the coding from the signal he received and it's disturbing to say the least. They've turned him into a slave! Let go of me, Rennin."

"We need you, William, we can't just fly out of here now. A

military installation just fired on us!"

"Keep your voices down!" calls Verge in a harsh whisper.

Caufmann's glare is fast becoming murderous. "Desolator satellites are not to be used on civilian or moving aerial targets. Someone exploited it for their own ends and will not have had Defence Force approval for such a strike. Therefore, the military don't know about it and once you make it beyond the borders of the city you'll be fine. I've uploaded an incredible amount of classified data on this infection for you to give to the first commander you find outside the city. It will ensure you'll be welcomed, not arrested."

"You can't stay here alone, and we *are* leaving. Today. You'll die here."

"Del is the closest thing to a son I will ever have," says Caufmann, so forlorn that Rennin forgets he's talking to an android.

Rennin looks away for a moment, glances at the gunship and the others, then back to Caufmann. "You're the best weapon against this infection if it's already spreading outside Raddocks Horizon. You're a doctor and a scientist, you have a responsibility."

Caufmann's expression is a very real one of incredulity, not a mere emotional feint. "You *dare* lecture *me* on responsibility?"

Rennin releases Caufmann's arm and puts his hands out placatingly. "Look, you said earlier that something is happening in Blackhaven. That's only one suburb from here."

"Something is controlling the contaminants, and I believe it's there."

"If we find it, it might help us get Del back. The contaminants are organic and so is Del, right? If it controls contaminants it might be controlling him, too."

Caufmann's eyes flash for an instant. He squares his shoulders. "Yes, that's possible."

"Either way I'm not leaving you here, so what are we doing?"

Sabre interjects. "If Croft has lost it and commandeered a Desolator satellite, going airborne again is suicide. But carrying a family, how can we travel on foot?" he nods towards Wayne, his wife and the two children who huddle together in the ship, mourning but alive.

Drej is wincing with a hand pressing against the side of his head. "There's a train under Whitechapel being used for supplies to the fortified area. It was originally constructed to aid the underground resistance when the GA briefly occupied the city during the war."

Caufmann looks at Drej mystified. "How would you know that?"

There's a madness in Drej's eyes but also an unsettling clarity. "The thing I hear in my head calling for help likes to talk."

Caufmann's mind races. *Perhaps there's more to this thing under the*

city; someone or some kind of construct down there calling out, and Drej is attuned enough to hear it for some reason. There were bizarre readings emanating from below the city when he was still in the lab, but I thought that was something caused by Prototype. Instead, Prototype may have been hiding down there not just to be obscured by interference, but also to search for this thing.

"I don't know what it is that's talking to you, Arca, but you're not as insane as I'd thought."

"It won't stop talking."

"Does it know what happened to Del?"

Drej nods. "I don't understand the information it's producing. It just says that Del is very small."

"I need any information it has immediately."

Drej nods, his eyes beginning to flicker. Caufmann's gauntlet beeps as a wealth of knowledge floods his system. Drej's eyes return to normal but he's frowning as if straining to hear a distant voice.

"It's now telling me that there's a reservoir under Blackhaven that can lead us to the Whitechapel underground railway."

"Arca, the sequence you've given me won't help him, it will kill him."

Drej ignores him, his face turns puzzled. "What?" he asks aloud. "Who? … A contaminant? …"

After a moment Caufmann taps him on the shoulder. "What is it saying?"

Drej looks at Caufmann. "It doesn't make sense. It says that a contaminant shot an organic conduit that was communing with a larger contaminant group. During his escape, he influenced contaminants to attack each other."

This information has Caufmann engrossed. "Who did this? What contaminant?"

"An elderly man called Sindaris Tessol."

"Where is he now?"

"This all happened just now. Tessol has just left this entity's scanner range."

Rennin looks to Caufmann. "What are we doing, William?"

Caufmann glances to Rennin, then to Dead Star. "Get the restraints from the gunship's POW case."

"Why?"

"Just do it."

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In Whitechapel, Commander Croft is wandering around in the

control room lost in thought. Desolator 1 cut a trench several kilometres long and the Defence Force has gotten wind of it. He's just finished his conversation with his superior outside the city wall, which has done nothing to abate the ever maddening look in his eye.

Hannon is rubbing the back of her neck nervously. Either her collar is chafing or she's been absently rubbing her neck so often that it's causing a rash. "Sir, what did they say?"

Croft glares at her for a moment. "Those idiots cut off our control of the Desolator satellites. We told them it misfired, they said that a mole program sent them the specific commands we gave it to fire at a skewed angle tracking one of our own gunships. They didn't *deem* it appropriate that we shot it down with honourable troops aboard despite the risk Caufmann *may* have posed. They said it was unlawful; that the *thing* Caufmann built was an *asset*, do you believe that?" his voice rising to a screech.

First Officer Hannon inwardly cringes. She doesn't want to answer any of his questions. She believes Jorge Croft is having a breakdown, but is too frightened to declare him unfit. "What will we do, sir?"

"It's simple. We—" he's cut off by a communication signal.

Hannon's face is shocked. "Commander, there's a call coming from gunship Dead Star."

For a moment Croft is stunned and it looks like fear on his face. His dark eyes look like liquid sinkholes, swirling with a new insanity. "Patch it through, Grace."

Hannon does so and on the screen is Beta HolinMech sniper: Mia Saker. In the background kneels a heavily bound Doctor William Caufmann, with Rennin Farrow standing guard, a gun to his head.

The sniper speaks immediately. "Sir! Mia Saker of Raston Squad reporting. Desolator 1 fired and Dead Star is all but wrecked. Del was lost in the crash and we have Caufmann in custody. Corporal Verge, Captain Sabre, our heavy gunner and a private are the only ones left alive. We're also escorting a family of uninfected civilians we rescued earlier. Awaiting instructions."

Croft feels his spirits lift instantly. He blinks a couple of times. "Good work detaining the doctor, but where is the Del android?"

Mia shakes her head. "Completely lost it once the Desolator fired on us. Smashed its way out and left us. Current location unknown."

Croft can't help but grin. The rewrite program has worked. He can't believe how well this has turned out. Earlier, he wasn't sure if they would follow through with the order. But now with Del out of the picture and Caufmann subdued—alive—he can interrogate him. "Bring him here. Any way you can. Your location isn't showing on our instruments."

“Transponder is shot to hell, we made an emergency landing on the Blackhaven-Currajong border.”

Croft nods. “We’re beginning an evacuation from Whitechapel through the train systems. The transports we used to bring everyone here from the Stadium left and haven’t returned. The havens outside the city were too full to move them straight there and we were stupid enough to think we could protect them here. They’re not coming back for us.”

“We know of some underground tunnels that lead from here to Whitechapel, connected through a disused reservoir.”

“I thought that was all flooded.”

“Apparently not, sir. It was used to catch rainwater for storage during the hydro-crisis eighty years ago, but since the weather augmenting machines were patented all underground storage reservoirs from then on were used up, then abandoned when empty.”

Croft can’t suppress another grin.

Too perfect.

“Excellent. Use them. Just get Doctor Caufmann to me, he has some serious questions to answer.”

“Yes, sir. Coming to you now as fast as we can.”

“We’ll be expecting you,” says Croft. As he moves to disconnect the call he catches Caufmann looking at him and feels a momentary chill as if the doctor’s eyes are drilling into his head.

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Sindaris Tessol can feel himself ailing. He is still bleeding badly, and he is unsure he can continue. He is still much too close to the reservoir entrance, but he can’t run anymore.

The deep gashes in his arms are so wide he has to entwine his limbs, clasping them tightly to himself just to hold them together. He has slowed to a stumbling pace. A normal man would have passed out quite a while ago. His accelerated healing is quick but isn’t able to deal with the wounds fast enough. He stops his awkward shambling to lean against a wall for a moment. He has to catch his breath.

Despite the threatening sky, the rain hasn’t started to fall. The clouds are ominous, and thunder is beginning to sound overhead. Between peals, he hears his thick blood splashing onto the ground and dribbling onto his boots. He feels dizzier by the moment but forces himself to look at the wounds on his arms.

Sindaris can still see exposed bone in one of the gashes regardless of the amount of blood oozing across the wound and out.

His mind begins to swim. His mind clicks back to reality, shaken

by the sound of his name being shouted not very far off.

Unbridled panic grips his heart. How could the infected still call his name? Sindaris grits his teeth and lets out a pained grunt at the futility of what he's just done.

He'd shot *a* controlling entity, he realises.

Maybe there are two, or ten. He grips his wound, sending a severe sharp pain up his arm and hears himself cry out. He can feel himself pulsing in and out of focus.

Then something strange happens. Something pops in the sky a few hundred metres away. He looks up and sees a bright green flare, followed by his name being called again.

Soldiers. They're looking for him. Somehow—he has no idea how—but somehow they know about him. They're even calling his name. So they also know that he'd understand them when they talk.

How?

He looks at the blood seeping through his fingers, feeling a wave of weakness creep over him again. He's going to die from these wounds, he knows. He feels himself huff out a small rueful laugh. Most people don't realise in the age of cybernetic augmentation that you can still die very easily from a serious enough injury to a full-orga extremity. Particularly a blade wound. Or several for that matter.

He looks up as another flare sails into the sky to explode in a beautiful green light. His wife's favourite colour was green.

Jasmine, he closes his eyes trying to picture her face.

Several others are calling his name from varying distances now. He lightly shakes his head at the sheer stupidity of whoever it is, calling out the way they are with hostile lunatics infesting every part of the city.

Or is it desperation?

He decides he has so little to lose by turning himself in that he might as well see what they want with him. He swings himself off the wall and makes his way towards the latest popped flare.

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Rennin fires another flare into the sky. He and Corporal Verge stand in the middle of an intersection calling for someone they've never met, feeling quite exposed when a hunching figure limps into view.

"Contact!" says Verge and her weapon is up instantly.

"Don't shoot, it might be what's-his-name," says Rennin aiming at the figure. 'Substance 6' flashes in the scope. "It's infected."

The slow moving silhouette is slowly moving towards them.

Verge is obviously anxious to fire. “They travel in packs, what do we do?”

“Hey!” Rennin calls to it. “Stop! Hands up!”

The figure continues sluggishly walking towards them. Verge shakes her head. “I’m going to put it down, Tessol is supposed to be intelligent.”

Rennin calls out. “If that’s you, Tessol, stop moving now!”

The figure halts about twenty metres away.

Rennin shines a torch and can see this man is badly wounded, bleeding heavily from both arms. “Tessol?”

Sindaris tries to answer but sways with weariness, barely managing to nod before croaking, “I can’t move…”

Rennin takes a few cautious steps towards Sindaris and shines the light into his face to get a look at him. He sees binary pupils turn to slits in magenta eyes when the light touches his face. “What the fuck?”

Sindaris’ eyes roll up in his head and he falls over.

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Above Raddocks Horizon there’s a shadow in the sky. That shadow is a station in extremely low geosynchronous orbit known as the Skyhook.

Doctor Mepida Rethrin stands at the docking area alone, watching as a small transport lands, the Godyssey emblem proudly emblazoned on the side. A hatch opens, producing Doctor Jellan Roths. Her lab coat is ripped and dirty, leaving exposed lacerations on both her body and face. For a second Rethrin thinks she’s infected, but her eyes are decidedly human and focussed. Roths’ expression looks more lethal than a loaded gun. “We’ve lost the city.”

Rethrin has already thought so but to hear it from one of the most intelligent minds of the modern age adds an entirely new level of discomfort for her. “Your report on the Suvaco units is—”

“Shocking, to say the least,” Roths interrupts. “William refuses to allow us to call in the HolinMech Warrior androids to help. His revolting project, Del, has gone rogue. I’ve been watching what general city surveillance remains on emergency power to find it. I only found it once and recorded what it was doing,” she says holding up a memory stick.

“What’s on it?”

“Not here.”

“What is it?” Rethrin asks.

“It’s too serious to show when someone might be watching us.”

“This whole station is automated, no one’s here but us.”

“No one’s here? Skyhooks are epidemic relief and treatment stations. Why is there no one here? Where are the medical staff?” asks Roths looking around, noticing the oppressive silence.

“I don’t know and I don’t care right now. At least it’s Godyssey, we’re safe here.”

“Look at me!” shouts Roths, holding out her arms to leave the tattered rags of her jacket draping down. “This happened to me in a Godyssey city! William’s pet project is ripping people apart and our company built the blasted thing.”

“The infected?”

“Everyone,” says Roths making her way past Rethrin. “Take me somewhere we can view it.”

Rethrin leads Roths through the empty Skyhook orbital base to a cabin she’s commandeered as her operational base. “Why did you wait so long to come up here?”

“There was work to do and many were wounded when the lab was hit by Prototype.”

Rethrin unlocks the door and they enter her cabin. “Desolator 1 fired without permission, did you hear?”

“I saw it fire. I informed the Defence Force and they’ve frozen all commands to the satellites in-city,” Roths says wiping her filthy brow.

“What did the Defence Force say in terms of relief effort?”

“There won’t be one. I spoke with General Faraday. He’s stationed just outside the city with the evacuated survivors. He said they’ve lost contact with their command.”

“Jesus Christ. How far has this spread?”

“Irrelevant,” says Roths handing her associate the disk. “Play it.”

Rethrin puts the disk into her personal terminal on her desk and the security footage starts playing with Del immediately drawing attention, holding a contaminant face down on the road and literally tearing it apart one chunk at a time. The contaminant is desperately thrashing around but Del’s grip is firm. Del thrusts his free hand down hard to pierce the fragile skin, ripping out the spinal column in one brutal movement, killing the contaminant instantly.

The spine itself wriggles about, a life form in its own right. Rethrin squints trying to get a closer look at the parasitic organism. Del gently places the spine in a sack of some kind and the recording ends. Rethrin looks to her superior immensely confused. “Why is it doing that?”

“I don’t know. It’s been doing that all over the city,” Roths says, removing the surveillance disk and handing Rethrin printouts of other bodies; stills taken from other cameras. All have the same injuries, their backs ripped open and spine torn out.

“Del’s been rogue for two hours now and has cut a swath like that

in a straight line leading towards Centre-city District."

"Why the spines? Why *just* the spines?"

"I don't know, but it's no mere trophy. William didn't program that in, I'm sure of it."

"How do you know?"

"Because Del is specifically designed to kill androids. He was built to hunt the progenitor-class," explains Roths.

"What can we do?"

"William is stuck in that city now, and the Horizon Military aren't equipped to deal with the growing hostile infected and a combat-grade android," says Roths typing into the console, bringing up an emergency communications channel with the HolinMech android moon base Iyatoya.

Van Gower answers the call, his hair dishevelled. He wipes his eyes. "Doctor Roths? How did you get this code?"

"Chairman Van Gower, we've issued an emergency distress call requesting the aid of HolinMech androids, and it has gone practically unanswered."

"They're in diagnostics."

"For an incident that happened *months* ago! The Defence Force of the United Governments has been informed and tomorrow morning you'll be *demanded* to release them. I'm calling to advise you, as my employer, that a receptive attitude to their aggressive request would be the wisest course of action."

"Thank you for giving me a heads up, Doctor Roths," he looks at her on his screen and frowns. "You look terrible."

"I only just made it to the Skyhook, the lab was destroyed, it's a disaster zone down there. Personally I don't understand why you're delaying so long just for diagnostics that should already have been well and truly completed."

"It's best to be completely prepared."

"Prepared for *what*?" she almost spits.

"Watch your tone, doctor."

Roths' eyes blaze. "How *dare* you? You haven't the slightest concept of what is happening down here. It must be an amazing comfort looking at all this from a safe distance but when these things, wearing the faces of people you know, are bearing down on you you'll find that common etiquette for people holding back valuable resources tends to escape you," she says, her tone utter poison.

For a moment Van Gower is silent. "I'm ordering you to evacuate the Skyhook since no other aerial transports are going to be entering or leaving the city apart from military gunships. The Horizon Military are beginning a full retreat. Whitechapel is being cleared as well by the train system."

Roths' forehead furrows. "The trains only hold a few hundred, how many trips are they going to make?"

"One."

"*One*? That won't evacuate everyone."

"Not a tenth. It's an executive order that as many immune as we can fit will be given passage on the trains and all others will remain behind, military and civilian alike."

"Until when?"

"Until the Alpha HolinMech team is deployed and seizes control of the city."

"When will that be?" demands Roths.

"As soon as possible."

"They have to hold out indefinitely, is that what you're saying?"

"The HolinMech Warrior team, led by Magnus Breen, will be en route and that is all you need to know. Until then, all Skyhook personnel—you two—will be moved up here. Tomorrow," says Van Gower disconnecting.

Rethrin shifts her stance and takes a breath as if she'd been holding it during that conversation. "Did you make that up? About the United Governments demanding him to release the HolinMechs?"

"If communications are down, there's no way to prove or disprove what I said. It's worth a shot either way."

Rethrin can't help but smirk, a fleeting expression that vanishes as quickly as it arrived. "There's something else you should know."

Roths has her hand across her eyes and sighs slightly. When she takes her hand away her eyes are wet but her expression is clear. "Why is there always more?"

"You worked on a few aspects of the HolinMech android system design, yes?"

"It's why I was given the job as William's second in Raddocks Horizon."

"Have you ever actually seen any of them?" Rethrin asks becoming more uncomfortable.

"No I can't say I have."

"Neither have I but several pockets of the military have worked with them on deployments and I can't think how it went unnoticed."

"How what did?"

Rethrin takes a breath. "I gained possession of a picture taken from security footage of one of the HolinMechs on mission. I don't know if it actually is, but it looks an awful lot like Forgal Lauros as a HolinMech."

"What?" says Roths, trying to focus her exhausted eyes. "Which one of them? What is this HolinMech called?"

"I don't know which it is. Since Arca Drej went missing his

picture is all over the place, so it's one of the remaining twelve androids in the team."

"Where did you get the picture from?"

"Peter Stanner's office."

"Who?"

Rethrin resists the urge to roll her eyes. "The policeman who shot all those people at the Gorai Aurelia Rally."

"He gave it to you?"

Rethrin makes a dismissive gesture. "Of course not. I ransacked his office at the abandoned police station the night I fled. There is a lot there worth going through but I was in a hurry and that picture stood out the most."

"What in the hell is going on here?"

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Sindaris opens his eyes to find himself staring at the ceiling of the reservoir.

For just a moment he's confused. He wonders if running outside and being found by the military was all a dream until he hears voices a little way off. Turning his head, he sees a small crowd of people nearby having a look at the destroyed controlling entity.

A hand grips his face and turns it upwards. Sindaris manages to gain a glimpse of two glowing green eyes before a torch is shone into his face making him squint. "Sindaris Tessol, I am Doctor William Caufmann," he says moving the light back and forth from one eye to the other. "How are you feeling?"

Sindaris pushes himself to a seating position feeling several shots of pain from his arms. He checks them to find they're both bandaged tightly. "I've been worse."

"I doubt that. We've been examining your handiwork," says Caufmann inclining his head towards the dead controller. "I really wish you didn't shoot it in the head."

As far as Sindaris' eyes are concerned he is looking at the remains of his wife. He blinks but her visage doesn't alter. "It still looks like her. Why does it still look like her?"

"Who?" asks Caufmann.

Sindaris nods to the downed construct. "It looks like the woman I married, the very day I married her."

Caufmann glances at the entity. "What I see is obviously substantially different to what you're perceiving. Unless you married a woman with looks akin to a poorly crafted mannequin. The fact you still see someone you recognise means it's not quite deactivated."

Sindaris seems to ignore him. “It was reading our minds, telling us what to do, uniting our entire consciousness into one driving force. Made my ears tickle and the hair on my head crawl.”

Caufmann’s glowing eyes glance up to Sindaris’ hairline. “Is that so?” he asks running his hand through Sindaris’ thick hair feeling the strands.

Sindaris feels a little uncomfortable, “It wasn’t as strange as what you’re doing now.”

“We’ll have to shave your head, Mister Tessol. You may do your privates yourself.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“This being you shot is a conduit, an organic conduit, that sends out signals like an insect hive-mind. Your hair seems to have mutated into a kind of antennae, receiving these signals. If you shave it off you might be able to block the effects of other contaminants.”

“But won’t that also blind me to being able to sense them?”

“In theory it should work both ways, yes.”

“That… conduit, controller, whatever it is, is dead now, so is it necessary to shave my hair off?”

“It is not the controller. It is only an instrument *used* to control. Whoever is piloting the conduit is the real controller.”

“Piloting it? From where?”

Caufmann shrugs, his unnerving gaze fixed on Sindaris. “Anywhere. And we would be foolish to think that this is the only one. It’s probably DNA encoded and piloted by the same method it used to gain influence over you and the other contaminants.”

Sindaris touches his own hair, “They’d have to be infected too.”

Caufmann nods, “More than likely. Some kind of alternate mutation, possibly like you.”

“How would we go about finding it?”

“Impossible as far as I can tell. How do you track organic telepathic signals?”

“They almost found me a few times through a kind of…” he tilts his head from side to side raising his hands searching for the right words, “… emotion web. A metaphysical target painted through the reactions of those around me to my presence when I exhibited any emotion strongly enough.”

Caufmann’s face is expressionless but his eyes shimmer slightly as the thoughts fire though his mind at a ridiculous speed. “That’s brilliant. Truly brilliant,” he says, looking back to the downed conduit. “We’ll find it through the contaminants, but how do we get a strong enough emotional reaction that you can track? I suppose the closest to the source of the emotion feel it the strongest?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sindaris, these others with me are leaving the city, you have the option to go with them.”

Sindaris laughs. “To do what? Surrender and become a science experiment? Examined in a lab, poked, prodded and put through trials just to be killed and dissected… I can’t leave. Not really, can I?”

Caufmann nods. “If I brand your forehead it’ll imprint a serial number indicating to scans that you’re Godyssey approved.”

“You mean ‘property’, don’t you?”

“Yes. Despite your infection you’ll be given enough leeway to move about freely as long as you’re not in contact with uninfected people. The branding also means you’ve been extensively examined by a high-ranking scientist in the department of genetic research. *My* department.”

“Won’t they expect scars of some kind?”

“The ones on your arms are adequate and while you were unconscious I did a little poking around. You heal *very* quickly when stitched up properly.”

Sindaris instantly looks down at his chest and pulls up his shirt revealing a massive scar from his abdomen up to between his collarbones. He lets out a shrill whimper when he touches it. Not from pain; from shock. “What did you do to me?”

“I merely had a brief look at your internal organs. The operating scar is already sealed. A little fragile but stable. I didn’t have time to examine your spinal column but I’ll get to it.”

“You certainly will *not*!” calls Sindaris pushing Caufmann away and sitting up gaining the attention of the others.

“I sedated you, don’t worry.”

“Of course, how silly of me to be upset in such a sterile environment.”

“Your infection renders most other bacteria null. Most that would kill you post op, I mean.”

Sindaris’ mouth twists into an artificial smile that would rival Caufmann’s most patronising feint of good cheer. “Keep your scalpel away from me.”

“Don’t you want to know what’s changing inside you and what isn’t?”

“Not as much as you do.”

Caufmann takes a small object that looks like a stamp from his coat pocket. “You still need this branding. You’ll show up on scans, military weapon scopes, and you’ll be flagged as friendly. Without it, you’ll be shot when we reach Whitechapel.”

Sindaris thinks for a moment then allows Caufmann to approach him. The doctor places the stamp against his head and presses the button on the tip, as if clicking a pen. A flash is seen followed by

Sindaris crying out. His forehead steams and the emblem of Godyssey is burned into his head. It's about the size of a bottle cap.

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Rennin is playing with Drej's knife, digging it into the reservoir's surface when Sindaris' scream of pain makes him jump. He watches Sindaris and Caufmann interact for a moment more before seeing that whatever happened was discussed prior. He returns his attention to the floor in front of him and continues scraping Drej's knife against it.

He's tried to return the knife again but the deserter HolinMech won't even touch it now. When Drej becomes agitated the knife vibrates. Rennin lays it down beside his rifle and observes the others, still crowding around the dead conduit. He sighs deeply and looks over to Wayne Carr. He sits with his wife and surviving children.

This is turning into a circus, Rennin concludes. Now they have two dead CryoZaiyons, a deserter HolinMech *and* an infected civilian that seems quite polite.

He sighs again when his rifle catches his eye. Something in the scope is flashing. He raises the scope to his eye. A quick inspection, and he can tell whatever was causing the flash is gone now. He frowns and puts it back down purposely in the exact place it was previously to see if it happens again.

The flashing does indeed start again.

He looks at it suspiciously for a moment and sees the knife in front of the scope. This time he picks the rifle up again aiming the scope at the weapon. 'Substance 6' flashes on the scope display. Rennin stares at it for a while as if in a trance then his eyes dart to Drej. He swings the rifle to aim at him. 'Substance 6' flashes again. Then he scans Antares, then Caufmann and both result in Substance 6 readings. He scans Sindaris and the same appears again. "Thermosteel…" he says and an image of Del enters his mind making him cringe.

Within minutes, he is at the centre of show and tell to Caufmann and the group. Unsurprisingly, there are very few positive reactions to this news.

Verge, Jawa, Carmine, and Sabre are mystified. Drake and Mia don't seem to care. Wayne is attempting to keep his children calm to stop himself from panicking; the kids themselves seem completely disinterested. Drej and Antares are fascinated.

"Substance 6 is Thermosteel… Del's been re-purposed to harvest it, is that what you're saying?" asks Antares.

"What else could it be? Thermosteel is the most valuable organic

mineral in the system. The contaminant bones are so strong because they're *made* of Thermosteel," says Rennin.

Caufmann shakes his head. "Taking Thermosteel from a dead body won't work, it has already solidified. The liquid primary stage is what's valuable so you'd need…" he trails off and his face turns blank.

Rennin nudges him. "Need what?"

Caufmann blinks then looks at him. "The parasite in each contaminant spinal column would be interacting with the bone marrow centres and must produce raw material. If Del is harvesting those parasites and they can be kept alive within a new host or even survive independently after the initial parasitic stage, they could produce the mineral indefinitely."

"This entire city is… a *farm*?" cries out Verge disbelievingly.

"This is insane, why here? Why not a third world country?" asks Sabre.

"You think that would be better? What the hell is wrong with you?" asks Jawa.

"It would be less obvious, is what I'm saying. This is a Godyssey city," Sabre counters.

"With a fully armed perimeter left over from the war. It would keep it contained," suggests Rennin.

Caufmann shakes his head. "No. This affliction was not meant to be used here, but the inadvertent architects of this disaster are taking advantage of it nonetheless."

"Well now what the fuck is going to happen?" asks Rennin.

"Nothing changes. We're going to Whitechapel."

15.
Breakout

After an hour of walking up the tunnel single file, Rennin has had enough. Drej's knife is constantly vibrating and it's driving him mad.

Looking back, he can see Antares is holding Drej's hand, quietly encouraging him along. Rennin can't stifle his eyebrow arching but looks away when Antares' green eyes lock on his.

Drej doesn't look good at all. He is scared to death of whatever it is down here that has been speaking to him constantly. Even with Antares assistance, Drej is almost mute with horror.

Mia and Drake have tried to raise Horizon Military in the field on all forms of communication with no success. All they are receiving is static.

Although there is a retreat to Whitechapel, they still should have been able to contact someone. But they haven't. Hours of tuning the receiver has picked up only two channels, the was only gunfire on the first, and contaminants babbling on the second.

Mia tries another channel. "Drake, which team is 107.65?"

"Whiskey," he answers.

"How do you even remember useless shit like that?" asks Rennin.

Drake shrugs. "It's like remembering radio stations, I guess."

Mia speaks into the radio. "Whiskey Unit this is Raston Squad, are you receiving?" Mia asks and waits a bit but there's no reply. "Whiskey Unit this—" she's interrupted by Rennin switching the radio pack off.

"No one's there."

"There might be someone, arsehole."

Rennin's eyes lock on hers like binary missiles. "What exactly are we going to do if we raise anyone? We can't do much more than tell them to go to Whitechapel, which they would already know, because if we can raise them then the base can too, and if you call me by my daddy's pet name for me again you can kiss our marriage goodbye."

Drej grabs Rennin's shoulder. "There are two Suvaco units inbound to our location."

"How the hell do they even know anyone's down here?" asks Jawa.

"They didn't say," says Drej deadpan.

"Was that a joke?" asks Rennin.

"Be quiet!" orders Caufmann. "Arca, there's nothing on my scanners."

"Nor mine," Antares shakes her head. "That thing is talking to

you isn't it? Where are they? How far?"

Drej's red eyes glance back the way they came. "Eighty metres."

"Behind us?" asks Mia, more rhetorically.

"Are they jamming you?" Rennin asks Antares.

There's a series of curses that ripple over the coterie. Caufmann watches his gauntlet. "We're just over a kilometre from Whitechapel," he mutters. "Sabre, take Mister Carr and run his family to the trains with Carmine and I *mean* run. Go!"

Sabre picks up one of Wayne's children, Carmine the other. "With our hands full we need a gunner," says the captain.

"Jawa, go with them, drop your gun if you have to."

"No way in hell I'm dropping old faithful," says the heavy gunner moving to stand beside Sabre.

"Sindaris, Drake, you too," orders Caufmann.

Wayne grabs Rennin's arm as he passes by. "Thank you, Rennin."

For a moment Rennin doesn't know how to respond so he just goes with the first thing in his head. "Make sure you run those thighs off," he says as he watches Wayne and his family leave.

He half smiles. There is no way he will ever see them again.

"Verge, you go too," says Caufmann.

The corporal shakes her head slowly, a frown on her face. "Not a chance. I've got a score to settle."

Rennin, Mia, Verge, Antares, Drej and Caufmann turn back towards the reservoir and there is a breath taken from each almost in perfect unison. Rennin and Mia take a few steps back towards the reservoir and crouch. The cylindrical tunnel isn't very wide so they have an advantage, in that the incoming Suvaco units won't have room to manoeuvre. The massive downside is a severe lack of cover.

Rennin remembers Roths telling Caufmann about Del's armoury being taken when the Suvacoes left the lab. The thought of all those hulking androids being armed is greatly unnerving.

Rennin pulls his sniper rifle off his shoulder and slings his assault rifle across his back, sighing as he's really feeling the extra weight. He takes out the clip and switches the necessary pieces back to bolt action. He grips the silencer, weighing up his options. The deafening sound in here will make each shot punishing for his hearing, but it will be more accurate. On the other hand, no one else is running suppressed so he removes it.

Rennin notices Mia eyeing his actions.

"Stronger and straighter this way," he whispers, winking like a salesman.

"You're talking about your rifle right?"

"One of them, yeah."

"Contact," says Caufmann taking aim with his pistol.

Mia presses the butt of her sniper rifle to her shoulder to look through the scope. She can't see them yet but their steps are growing louder, she can hear their approach.

Rennin's artificial eye can just make out an outline. He wants to take the shot, but he finds his hands frozen, awaiting an order to fire. Two pairs of red eyes suddenly flash on closer than expected.

Rennin's instinct responds.

Target acquired.

He fires a round into the head of the one on the left a split second before Caufmann calls out for them to shoot. He can't tell if the bullet penetrated the helmet or glanced off but he pulls the bolt back on the rifle, loading another bullet, and fires again.

The tunnel is extremely dark but when Drej, Verge and Antares open fire the area is lit up with orange and yellow light and screams of gunfire reverberating off the walls. The Suvaco unit Rennin hit is stumbling back and the other has raised an arm over its face to block the barrage of incoming fire.

Rennin and Mia fire until their sniper guns are empty and overheating, before dropping them on their sling and raising assault rifles to continue their rapid fire. A grenade sails over Rennin's head, thrown by Antares. It explodes on impact but the Suvacoes still don't go down.

The ringing from the gunfire is deafening and Rennin can't even hear his own voice yelling as he fires at the red-eyed giants. They move in, more quickly now.

The Suvaco on the left aims its weapon towards him; Rennin feels himself sag before a stab of dread takes over. Being confronted with a chain gun is not what he expected today. The figure of Antares eclipses his view as she steps in front of him, coinciding with the creature unleashing its first array of fire.

Rennin stays low wishing he could curl into a ball like an armadillo and roll away. Now the only light in the tunnel is coming from the chain gun barrel and the sparks from everything it impacts. Rennin finds himself hunched down screaming, feeling the percussion of every bullet hitting Antares' kinetic shield like a drumbeat in his chest. Barely a moment passes before her shield is torn away, leaving her defenceless.

Drej has positioned himself in front of Mia, absorbing a wave of bullets that glance off his plate armour, but when they hit his skin they tear straight into it. Rennin is mesmerized by that terrible image and can feel it burn into his memory.

He cannot believe that either of the androids are still standing. Antares is still being pummelled. Looking behind him, Caufmann is protecting Corporal Verge. He's taken a shot to the head and if an

android could look dazed, Caufmann would be the poster child.

The chain gun finally stops shooting, the tunnel goes dark, and Rennin feels Antares spring off into the smoky haze. He can just make out Drej slumping forwards.

The HolinMech took a lot of fire, but he braces himself, one hand on the ground as he reaches out towards their enemy; a red energy beam exploding from his hand.

It slams into the Suvaco on the right just as Antares careers into the one on the left. She glows green as she throws punches into its face, crushing the weakened faceplate inwards with sickening force. The hulking Suvaco takes a clumsy swing at her but she ducks under it as if it were attacking slow motion. She manages to leap onto its back to pull at its helmet, drawing its head back to expose its throat.

"Shoot it!" she yells.

Rennin and Mia grab their sniper rifles, reload them quickly, and take aim.

"The neck!" Antares directs.

"I can't hold on much longer." Drej continues to fire his weakening energy stream.

"Ready, Saker?" Rennin calls to Mia.

"On three?"

"Three!"

They fire.

Rennin's shot hits the Suvaco's neck padding but Mia's hits just above, tearing through its throat, taking it out. The android stumbles sideways, Antares leaping from it to take grip of her sword and lop off the leg of the second target, cutting through its knee from behind. It collapses, giving her easy access, and in one smooth movement she removes its head.

Drej's blast stops and he falls forwards to his hands and knees, finally depleted, and bleeding from a multitude of gunshot wounds. Rennin looks from Drej to Antares as she decapitates the Suvaco Mia shot in the throat with one clean stroke.

Always double tap.

A flare burns to life behind him and he turns to see Caufmann slumping down in a cloud of cold steam with Verge crouching over him, hands fluttering as she tries to help. It's difficult to touch someone when they're bleeding a liquid that will freeze your skin solid. Antares is also hissing steam heavily as she sheaths her sword and hurries back to them.

"Arca? Are you alright?" she asks.

Drej looks up and forces himself to stand. The effort isn't so much seen in his facial expression as it is in his shaking limbs. He's taken some grievous wounds.

“I am damaged,” he says absently, looking at his right hand and the perforation a shell has made straight through it. “Are you hurt, Antares?”

She examines herself, finding her arms torn, exposing bone and circuitry. Her torso is largely intact despite her armour being all but broken. “I don’t feel any pain.”

Caufmann rubs a wound in his forehead where a bullet ripped through all but his skull. A few rounds managed to punch through his armoured lab coat, and his breathing is laboured. “I have a bullet lodged in my right lung.”

“I didn’t know your kind had lungs,” says Verge.

“My kind were your kind,” he says more rudely than he intended. He places a small cylindrical object to the hole in his chest. With a disgusting wet slap, the bullet is drawn out into the tube. Caufmann ejects the slug and puts the cylinder back in his pocket.

“What the hell is that?” asks Rennin trying to get a good look at the device.

“Can I have one of those?” asks Mia.

Drej spits up some blood. “There are two more entering the reservoir. They’re coming to us.”

“We can’t survive another attack like that,” says Verge.

Rennin removes a grenade from his ammo belt. “This should do the trick.”

Verge shakes her head, “That’s a NAPA bomb. It’ll bring the whole tunnel down on us.”

Rennin shrugs. “At least it’ll be a tie.”

“What are you suggesting, Rennin? We can’t trigger them remotely.”

“We throw it. All we need to do is slow them down,” he says arming it and setting the blast zone to five metres. He shakes his head with a regretful expression on his face. “Five metre radius… what a waste.”

“Use some regular grenades,” suggests Verge.

“Might not work. NAPA bombs cause enough residual seismic shock to ensure a collapse,” says Rennin.

“That’s very interesting, Professor, but you might want to hurry it up,” says Verge checking her ammunition.

Antares snatches the grenade. “I’ll throw it, you lay down some cover-fire.”

Caufmann puts Drej’s arm around his neck and hauls him up the tunnel. “Don’t wait until the perfect time, just throw it when you see an opportunity.”

“Verge, cover William and Arca,” says Rennin readying his sniper rifle. “Saker, we take one each in the head to stagger them, then

Antares will throw the bomb."

Caufmann and Verge move away with the limping Drej, leaving a nasty trail of Drej's blood. Rennin and Mia kneel and wait for the Suvacoes. Antares' face is completely neutral. "I won't be able to shield you this time, Sergeant Farrow."

"That's okay, Mum."

The first red-eyed monster comes into view and Antares readies her throw. Rennin and Mia both adjust their stance, preparing to fire. The Suvaco has stopped walking towards them, looking down to study the ruins of its brother units.

The second comes into view. Both observe the two Suvaco corpses, surveying their damage before turning to face each other.

Rennin can swear some form of communication is passing between them but his scope is registering no communication signals of any kind. He also notes an absence of Substance 6.

So they're not made with Thermosteel.

Antares calls for them to shoot and both snipers obey, snapping out a round each, Rennin shooting the left Suvaco, and Mia the right. Both shots hit their respective targets in the head, only to glance off their helmets. While they are stunned, Antares throws the NAPA bomb. Mia and Rennin turn away, making their retreat up the tunnel towards Whitechapel. Antares provides cover-fire for the final second before the detonation knocks all three of them over. The grid sphere of the NAPA bomb appears, and everything within is incinerated in one intense blast of white light, followed by a devastating concussive force.

The tunnel begins collapsing almost immediately. A chunk of stone falls on Antares but she strikes it aside as if it were a cushion and runs away from the falling debris. She grips both Rennin and Mia by their webbing, hauling them to their feet. The rumbling from the NAPA detonation ceases but the sounds of falling rock are loud enough to keep them running at full sprint.

Rennin never has been one to back down from a fight and he doesn't like running away but seeing Antares, Drej and Caufmann all badly wounded from a single encounter rams home the simple fact that he's far and away out of his league. He sees this is doubly true when he remembers what Isfeohrad did to him the night of the GA rally.

So many stories he's seen over the years, regardless of the medium, have lied to him. There is truly no way a human can stand toe to toe with an android.

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In Whitechapel, the station for the underground train system is a mass of the immune queuing to evacuate. They are boarding but progress is slow due to the sheer exhaustion of all involved. Some of them look like they don't even care if they get out. Barely any are talking to each other.

Commander Croft watches the exodus on the surveillance system. He switches the view to a camera on street level, watching the people remaining on the surface go about their business. Only the ones selected to leave have been taken to the trains. The others are just going to have to remain here to outlast this crisis.

He wipes the sweat from his forehead and wonders how he's going to tell his troops that all military personnel have to stay in Whitechapel indefinitely. They are not immune. Priority persons are being evacuated and that is all.

His troops think the trains will be coming back, that this load of evacuees is the first of many. If the locals find out about the evacuation, he will tell them the same. But the trains will not return. No one would risk keeping the gates of the city open for this contagion to escape. The people leaving will be 'extensively examined' by the Godyssey base outside Raddocks Horizon. Perhaps staying isn't the worst that can happen.

He's pondering this when a report appears on his screen that Doctor Caufmann has been brought in by a badly wounded HolinMech. Several others have also emerged from the underground tunnels from Blackhaven.

He's out of his office in a heartbeat, sprinting towards the standoff that's happening up the street. Arca Drej, thought-to-be missing HolinMech, is apparently refusing to stand down. He finds a crowd of soldiers around the small band of Raston Squad. Caufmann is on his knees with a gun pointed at the back of his head, held by Arca Drej. Another gunman with strange eyes and a Godyssey branding on his forehead is holding a gun on the doctor from a few steps away. Others stand at the ready but their weapons at their side.

The commander takes in a firm breath and feels his back straighten with confidence. "Welcome, Raston Squad!" he announces, indicating for his men to relax their aim on the human element. "And Doctor Caufmann, I've been looking forward to this."

Caufmann looks shocking. His wounds no longer steam, though he looks like a decidedly weak and beaten, almost organic man. "I will cooperate."

"Ease your aim, HolinMech, we have him now."

Drej is swaying slightly but when he faces Croft he does so in a smooth movement that is too fluid for any full-orga. "Directive: HolinMech Operation. All orga-commands are overridden. To you and

your men I am Commander Arca Drej. You will issue all commands from here on out through myself. Interfacing with me is your highest priority. Cooperation will be rewarded."

Croft is on the back foot immediately. "If I refuse?"

Drej's red eyes shine but with a deadness that clearly says there will be no negotiation. "You may refuse. As per my core directive you will be shot."

"On what grounds?" Croft screeches.

"Mutiny. Under the HolinMech Deployment Code, section one-oh-one-seven-oh-seven you are now the property of Godyssey and I am their extension in the field. Disobedience will be judged with zero tolerance. What I ask next will be asked only once, with no second chances and no exceptions: Is this a declaration of mutiny?"

Croft feels his whole world turn inside out and his throat fill with sand. *This thing thinks it's in charge?* "Your kind are not even supposed to *be* here."

"Answer my question, immediately," says Drej in a rasping tone.

Croft's heart is beating so hard it feels like it'll burst through his ribs. He glances at his troops to see some are shifting their body weights uncomfortably. "How many do you think you can kill?"

"My core is hardwired to detonate should an uncontrollable act of sedition occur. I am currently on standby for detonation. My core is a Gamma Drive capable of levelling fifteen city blocks without damaging the people boarding the trains beneath."

"Killing your own team?"

"Android priorities are not your concern unless I evaluate it so. You have three seconds to answer my question. The next words out of your mouth will be: yes or no," says Drej, the veins in the sides of his face and down his neck glowing red.

Croft eyes his troops, many of whom have taken a pointless step away from the HolinMech.

Traitors, he thinks and he feels something in his mind slip away. It is a form of reason, perhaps, evaporating or draining, leaving a feeling of being boxed in, trapped, and nowhere to go.

Traitors deserve to die.

The people under the city will be safe anyway. He feels himself grin. No one person had ever taken out a HolinMech and that's a nice big notch for anyone's belt. "Then 'yes' it is. Open f—" he is cut off by a bullet tearing through his head. No one even sees Drej move, but he executes Croft with a lightning fast movement. Despite a faint whisper from one of Croft's troops that sounds distinctly like skyward gratitude to what Rennin calls the Sky Fairy they remain standing still, all eyes upon Drej. The glowing red veins that are creeping down his arms begin to fade away.

Caufmann stands up, retrieving his sidearm from Drej as the HolinMech slumps forwards. “Easy, Arca, we’re almost out of here.”

“I have enough energy but keeping my limbs under full control is proving difficult. Many of my muscles and tendons are damaged, I can only compensate for the others if I focus.”

“How long will your nano-repairs take?”

An explosion from the tunnel leading to Blackhaven shocks everyone. Antares bursts out of the darkness at full speed. “Incoming!” she cries as a missile strikes the ground behind her. She dives forwards and rolls, diverting a great deal of debris with her personal shield.

Rennin takes a knee immediately and swings his gun to aim at the tunnel opening. “Did both those bastards survive the NAPA bomb or just one?”

“One was destroyed but the other is on all out attack, with two reinforcements.”

“We blew the tunnel, how did this happen?” asks Mia, taking up a position next to Rennin.

“A side passage, maybe it didn’t fall in completely, I don’t know,” says Antares.

“How was it sealed from this end before we arrived?” asks Rennin.

“Not by something that will hold three Suvacoes,” says Caufmann.

“Fall in! This is our only chance to have them bottlenecked!” calls Rennin to the troops.

Sabre, Carmine, Verge, Drake and Mia join him on the line immediately. After a split second of indecision Croft’s troops fall in line. Almost three-dozen guns are pointed at the entrance, the majority held by troops with no idea what is coming.

“Anyone with heavy ordnance, only fire on definite hits. These things are heavily armoured,” orders Sabre. “We cannot fall back and risk them flanking us, they need to be stopped here!”

Antares takes a knee next to Rennin. She is steaming from several new wounds but they look superficial. Rennin notes it’s a nice change from the grievous ones they’ve been subjected to lately.

“You’ve had a hard day, Sunshine, would you like to do your nails or something and let the *men* handle this?” he asks.

“The way you handled Prototype the night of the rally?”

“That was a draw.”

A pair of red, glowing eyes appear in the tunnel ahead.

“Fire!” calls Sabre.

The entire cluster of soldiers opens fire, pouring round after round into the tunnel. The first Suvaco strides out into view. Two

more sets of eyes appear in the dark behind it. A shaking, trigger-happy rocketeer launches a missile that hits the wall, only serving as a mild distraction.

The lead Suvaco waves its chain gun, evaluating targets before opening fire. The first shot is followed by a hail of bullets, causing the defenders to break lines and scatter for cover. The initiative is already lost, with the three hulking androids moving inexorably forward with no resistance.

Antares sees her chance to attack their flank while the soldiers hold their attention. She drops her assault rifle and starts a run at the trio with her sword drawn. The blade has been the most effective weapon against the heavily armoured killing machines, as long as she can get close without being fired upon.

As she moves it feels like the world slows somehow. The CryoZaiyon wonders if this attack will see her killed. Her shields are almost totally depleted and her core is burning far more energy than she can sustain. One direct hit and she may finally die.

Her war could be over.

Her child is dead. Her parents are dead. Her husband is dead. Seeing him again, after losing the others, was her last motivation for surviving what she endured under Van Gower. She is only a walking puppet version of whoever she once was. Machines have no feelings, anyway. Machines don't think for themselves. Machines follow orders. Machines don't want revenge.

She forces her mind to go silent.

This is a way for her to die doing something worthwhile.

Something worth being remembered for.

Until she cuts these units down she makes herself believe she's invincible. She can be wounded, blown apart and mortally injured but she will not fall until these units are dead. Certainty fills her mind with calm.

With what energy she has left she compresses it together, imagining a ball of fire, set to erupt on her command. Should she be incapacitated before killing them she'll explode just as Drej threatened to earlier, with a localised blast radius that will do little more to the surrounding soldiers than scathe their skin, hopefully no permanent damage to their eyes and ears.

Machines don't die, they become inactive. She forces this through her head, but she doesn't believe it applies and never has. *But it has to be better than this.*

It has to.

She approaches silently, blindsiding a Suvaco by lopping its weapon arm off above the elbow. It turns to face her but the hardest energy channelled swing she's ever performed takes its head clean off.

One down, two to go.

She moves towards the next one but it is already aware of her. It swings its chain gun towards her, continuing to fire. Her skin shines with a green glow, absorbing the barrage from point blank range with what's left of her shield. She forces her core to release more energy in a rage, manifested by a scream of very real anger in the kind of clarity a person seldom experiences.

The fusillade from the Horizon Military bounce off the Suvaco plate armour, without any acknowledgement. Antares' shield degrades quickly and in no time the chain gun is shredding the remainder of her torso armour. She reverses the grip on her sword and slams the blunt side across the chain gun's shaft, warping it enough to cause a backfire, successfully disabling the weapon. Her chest and abdomen hiss steam fiercely as she flips the blade again and slashes across its neck. Purple blood fountains from the wound and it falls to its knees, grasping its neck in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding with its hands.

Last one.

The final Suvaco is firing a grenade launcher that shoots freezing glowing spheres. Since cold rounds are useless against a CryoZaiyon she thinks luck may be on her side, until a rocket fired from a shaky Horizon trooper misses the Suvaco and explodes against her shield, shattering it.

After a concussion wave laced with shrapnel strikes her she can't feel or hear anything as she is thrown off the ground, feeling something of herself open up to the world. All she can see is steam. She comes down hard a few metres away. Antares can't see the still firing soldiers, or Rennin Farrow snatching the rocket launcher from the frightened trooper and laying him out with one severe strike from his combat chassis arm.

She looks up into the mist pouring from her midsection and the glowing bullets flying through it like super accelerated fireflies. The sounds of gunfire and bullets hitting the stone walls are muffled and dull in her ears now.

'*Critical Failure*' flashes in her vision. She is still alive, though badly wounded. She still has an objective.

Her sword still in one hand, she reaches down with the other, salvaging the flap of skin that was once her abdomen to peel it over the wound, clamping her forearm across it to hold herself together. She brings her knees up and pushes off the ground with her sword arm feeling a sluggishness indicating she's lost a great deal of her abdominal muscle system.

Antares manages to stand and takes a step towards the Suvaco but the movement causes a wave of pixelated darkness to swamp her

vision and she nearly collapses.

She is about to engage her core's overload sequence when she sees someone in the blast zone running at the Suvaco head on.

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Rennin Farrow felt fantastic smashing his fist into that trooper's face. Cowards have no place on the battlefield, not to mention erratic rocketeers.

More of a danger to his own side, idiot.

The rocket launcher at the ready, he finds himself running as fast as he can towards the lone remaining Suvaco. A blue shimmering rocket flies at him so he strafes left just managing to register the freezing ground where he was a moment before. Goosebumps appear on his right arm, along with a severe chill.

I hate ice launchers.

He can see the crippled form of Amber Antares swing down with her sword across the back of the Suvaco's knee, causing a spray of purple blood. The creature arches back, almost overbalancing.

Rennin yells for Antares to get clear but the best she can manage is to throw herself sideways. Rennin wants to fire a rocket but he won't risk hitting her, not at all. His trigger finger twitches slightly in frustration.

Drej's knife!

The Thermosteel grown in Drej's own body should be strong enough to penetrate the Suvaco armour. There is nothing known that can resist Thermosteel.

He throws the rocket launcher aside and sprints at the off balance Suvaco, gripping the knife it in both hands, bracing the butt of it against his torso plate.

At full speed, Rennin careers into it. With his body's weight behind it the blade drives through the armour and into the android's stomach.

It lets out a anguished howl when Rennin twists it left, then right, then pulls the handle up forcing the blade down then slamming down on the machete length knife with all his might and ripping it out.

How do you like seppuku?

The beast of a thing lands a blow across his head and he stumbles to the side, stunned, barely managing to retain any vision at all.

A sniper round fires from behind Rennin, hitting the Suvaco in the arm causing it to drop the ice launcher. Rennin can only see out of his artificial eye and throws himself on the weapon, picking it up and only managing to point it at the android's legs before desperately

firing a round.

The glowing blue ball strikes, splashing outwards all over the surrounding area. Some of it hits Antares. The Suvaco roars out in surprise and alarm before it snaps cleanly in half. Its upper body lands on its back, thrashing about, bleeding through icicles that were innards only a moment before.

Rennin is too dizzy to aim properly and can feel blood running down his face as if it's raining on only one spot on his head. He tries to focus while Antares crawls over to the torso, leaving a trail of steaming blood. The ice splashback fluid has frozen hard on her skin but merely breaks, falling away as she moves. Abandoning her sword, she now holds her sidearm.

She scrambles close enough to press the barrel of the gun against its helmet eye socket, emptying the clip through the vulnerability, finally killing it. Antares drops the gun and falls limp as Rennin passes out.

The last thing she thinks of is Forgal, just as he was before the dehumanising tragedy that befell all her kind.

The last—and inexplicable—thing Rennin thinks of is his father double bouncing him off a trampoline.

16.
Arrival

The defeat of the Suvacoes precedes a long and horrible night.

After the Horizon Military demolished the tunnel to Blackhaven completely with explosives to ensure no further incursions, silence fell.

Night in Whitechapel has become a thing of nightmares. The turrets on the fortifications fire spasmodically at straying contaminants. With the citywide blackout the shots ring out so loudly that all those trapped behind within Whitechapel's protective walls can feel each shot resonate within their heart.

Screamers surround the district, their frantic, genuine sounding cries for help are driving the immune local population mad with dread.

The tension is palpable since trains have left the station, never to return. It's smothering and inescapable and has been followed by a day that isn't much better.

The only bright light for the stranded people is the real life HolinMech Arca Drej's presence. A Godyssey funded soldier has come to protect the district at last, lifting the morale of the locals. Stories have circulated already that Drej and another android fought off three massive android attackers.

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Initially, the presence of Doctor Caufmann is barely tolerated. After two long, drawn out weeks in Whitechapel, the locals have come to see him as one of their own. Wayne Carr and his family had managed to escape, arriving in time for the secret evacuation via the last underground trains. Rennin took the news with his usual sarcasm but due to an incredibly severe concussion he has been having trouble collecting his thoughts. Caufmann thinks too much trauma to his head over the last short months probably isn't helping.

The Suvaco's hit to Rennin's head caused a severe cerebral contusion, and ruptured his organic eye. Caufmann managed to save the eye, though it has been bound and will have to remain so for quite a while.

Sindaris Tessol has not been welcomed due to his extreme case of infection. The poor man was instantly confined and was left there almost a week before Caufmann could convince the locals into

releasing him. Allowing people to see Sindaris and talk to him might show them that this man poses no threat.

The overriding fear that the survivors harbour for the infected was unable to be alleviated, despite Sindaris not being contagious. Many people who saw him could not see past his reptilian binary pupils.

In the end Sindaris volunteered to be incarcerated to ease the public unrest. There were a few that made an effort to speak with him, overcoming their fear, who now visit regularly to keep him company. A little girl plays chess with him, he is teaching a young boy to paint, an elderly teacher enjoys their verbal sparring sessions, where both act like curmudgeonly old coots. Any who come to treat him as a circus sideshow, or some object of peculiarity, are not allowed to return.

Rennin walks around the streets of Whitechapel near to the fortified walls when the electrified top of the fence blasts to life, cracking loudly and making him jump. Another climbing contaminant has been burned alive by the generators.

His scattered thoughts turn to food, so he wanders towards the main food hall, where the remaining immune trapped in Whitechapel dine each night at 7pm. The large tables are set close, the diners accommodating each other like one massive family with everyone bonding over a meal. This has helped build a sense of community amongst all these people that were left behind. All they have left is each other, so they keep close. Rennin initially thought they'd all keep to themselves, looking after number one, but most of them are families and have learned to value others above themselves. Rennin still cannot believe this catastrophe, this crisis, has birthed something Rennin feels himself mentally retch at the thought of.

Wholesome.

Mia and Drake are inseparable now. Rennin spots them eating and joins them. He sits, feeling a slight wave of dizziness that passes momentarily.

"It's good to see you two have managed to pry apart your pelvises long enough to eat something," he says smiling lopsidedly.

"Is that a smirk or are you having a stroke?" asks Mia.

The general mood at the table is quite depressed, even the jokes seem to have a more serious edge than usual. Drake looks at him in a resigned way. "How are you feeling?"

"Am I as charming as ever?"

“Like a cobra.”

A hand taps on Mia’s shoulder and she looks up to see a group of people dressed in combat gear. “What’s up?”

A woman, clearly a civilian, but wearing Horizon Military armour speaks. “It’s going to be twilight in twenty minutes. The light at dawn and dusk seems to frighten the contaminants so we’re going to use that time to get out of here and look for survivors.”

“That’s insane,” Mia says through a mouthful of food.

“There could be others like us or even like Tessol out there, we have to try to find them.”

“What’s your name?” asks Mia.

“Sandra Kay.”

“Do you even know how to handle that weapon?” asks Mia, eyeing her machinegun.

“We’ve all been taught to shoot since we’ve been here,” she says defensively.

Mia stands up. “I can’t go in the field because I honestly think it would be stupid to venture out since pretty much the entire city is overrun now. You’re looking for someone in particular?”

Sandra looks down. “Anyone. Feels like the end of the world cooped up in here. The others with me feel like I do.”

Rennin can’t resist an audible scoff. “I can hear a very faint violin playing somewhere.”

“It’s probably the whistle of the wind passing through that chasm between your ears,” says Drake.

Sandra shakes her head at Rennin and faces Mia again. “We could use your help, you’re the best sniper here,” she says and Rennin is about to disagree but Drake flicks some food into his face.

Mia leans in towards Sandra and whispers something but Rennin’s keen hearing picks it up. “Pregnant?” he cries looking at Drake. “We’ve got a city full of hungry, angry, pointy mutants and you’re fertilising the lawn?”

Drake throws his utensils into his tray, “Jesus, Rennin!”

As they start arguing about who’s the bigger, grander fool, Mia pulls on Sandra’s collar to see if she’s wearing a chain. “No dog tags?”

“I’m not a soldier.”

Mia pulls hers from around her neck and hands them to Sandra. “Take these for luck. Lose them and I’ll kill you.”

Sandra takes them and puts them on with a wan smile. “Thanks.”

“Don’t be sardonic, they have a short range tracker in them in case you get lost, nearby friendlies can pick up your location up to a klick away.”

“Only that far?”

“Well you don’t want enemy satellites tracking your troop

movements. They're only for short range tracking in case you get separated from your squad. They're encrypted but it's not worth the risk."

Sandra nods, "Then thank you."

Once Sandra walks off with her small band, Mia sits back down. "They're insane."

"They didn't even ask if Boy Blunder here would go with them," says Rennin reaching across the table to pinch Drake's cheek.

"Well they didn't ask you, either."

"I have a bung eye and a concussion."

"*Sure* it's a concussion," says Drake nodding with exaggerated slowness.

"By the way I'm not pregnant," says Mia. "I fucking hate kids."

Rennin laughs.

She shovels another spoonful of suspiciously pink sludge into her mouth, "You tell someone you're pregnant, no one asks you to do anything. They're all suddenly *really* concerned about a collection of bacteria that's more like a tumour than a person."

"Well there goes my appetite," sighs Drake.

Rennin smiles, poking at some greenish goo on his plate that looks like it may once have been a potato blended with broccoli and old liposuction fluid.

"Do you think Antares will pull through?" he asks half-heartedly.

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In the medical structure, Caufmann has been keeping hourly status reports on Antares' steadily deteriorating condition. Recently she had woken up, temporarily overcoming her grievous wounds to manage a few brief conversations.

Caufmann reads her charts with a detached expression but when Rennin enters Antares' room he knows the doctor isn't happy.

"Just like old times?" asks the former watchman.

Caufmann puts the chart down on the bed, peers into Antares' weary green eyes then glances to Rennin, "You have no idea how close to the truth you are, Ren."

Something terrible gleams from Caufmann's eyes and it makes Rennin lean back slightly. "What is it?"

"I haven't performed such a despicable perversion of a patch up in over fifteen years."

Antares smiles. "I told you… to leave me… on the street."

"What patch up?" asks Rennin.

"She's mortally wounded and all I've managed to do in a fortnight

is slow the process down. Just like the Jupiter Sieges…" he trails off, taking a ragged breath. "Everyone died, all I did was slow it down so they'd be able to fight longer to see out their last fragments of borrowed time under the same rain of firepower that killed them in the first place." he says gritting his teeth and turning away from them both.

Rennin glances at Antares then looks to Caufmann. "Why did…" he starts, unsure what his question is.

"We weren't reinforced. We had to make do with what we had. I was brought dead androids, and I made them live again. Can you picture it?"

Rennin shakes his head slowly. "No, sir."

"I think the worst of it was when the Jupiter Sieges ended. Watching maimed troops survive the last battle just to succumb to their injuries," he says holding his hands up in front of Rennin. "They survived the war but they didn't survive me."

Antares huffs out an artificial laugh. "Decora, you… blamed yourself for every death we suffered. It's… quite enough."

"What did you think you were doing running at three Suvaco units like that?" Caufmann yells wheeling around to face her. "There are too few of us left to throw our lives away!"

Antares is still smiling but her eyes are wet and closed. "I'm so tired. I don't want to fight anymore. My husband—" she chokes up slightly, "my… Forgal was everything I fought for. He fought to free us, Nexarien, and I fought to free him. From them and from himself. He wasn't strong enough to fight on his own. None of us were. But through our slaughter of the humanists we learned that carnage can't free us. Of all of us, I pity Saifer the most. Even more than I do you."

Caufmann shakes his head, "Saifer? Why?"

"He knew more than anyone that something was wrong with our existence. He threw himself into the frontlines as if fuelling the rage would make him whole. Zillah followed. The two of them butchered thousands but their madness only grew. I didn't think either of them would ever come back but sooner or later the fighting, the killing, the murder, has to stop. Like all things living, rage withers and dies.

"Saifer had nothing. Now he, himself, is nothing. He died without purpose and without value, in himself or anything. He represents the true tragedy of all of us."

Rennin feels a light stab of anger in his throat. He feels affronted and takes incident with her words. To him, Saifer Veidan was the best he'd ever seen. He was strong, brave, and protected his troops whether human or android. He finds it difficult to swallow that Antares would dismiss him so easily. Though he can't deny the truth in her words.

Caufmann can't bring himself to cry. He would never cry and right now he envies Antares bitterly. He will never feel value as she does for anyone. The closest he's come is a creature branded an abomination by most that is now dismembering contaminants far and wide across the city.

The doctor reaches into his pocket and pulls out the envelope containing the picture of the very much alive Forgal Lauros. Part of him doesn't want to show her now that she's chosen to die. He wishes he had found the time before she made her dash into an impossible fight, only to be cut down by friendly fire, of all things.

Maybe it would have given you hope.

"I can save your life if I get you to the lab. Your tomb will repair some of the damage and keep you alive well and truly long enough for me to get a proper surgery organised. But if I move you, it might kill you."

"I've already told you, Nex, I want to… stay here. No more surgery. I don't want to live as this *thing* anymore."

Caufmann's hand is trembling as he fumbles with the envelope and removes the creased picture of her husband. "I don't even know if I should show you this. It could mean any number of things," he says holding up the photo.

Her glazed, wet eyes, stare at it for a moment and it doesn't seem to register but suddenly she holds her breath. Her eyes sharpen in an instant and focus intently. She looks to Caufmann, "He…"

"Yes," he nods. "When I told you he was dead, I was absolutely sure he was. When I received this picture," he says not glancing at Rennin. "I didn't know…*how* to tell you. I didn't know what it meant. I *still* don't."

"He's still a slave."

Caufmann blinks. "Perhaps. He could have been repurposed. Or it could be even worse."

Antares spears the doctor with a piercing glare despite her condition. "He's *not* a traitor. He doesn't know how to be."

She reaches for the picture and Caufmann passes it to her. She stares at it for a long moment even though the image is permanently written into her mind. Antares scans over it again and again, especially the face, trying to read his eyes. After being silent for a long while she drops the picture on the floor.

"He doesn't know who he is," she says wearily but her eyes remain focussed. "All right, Nexarien, take me to the lab. I'm going to burn Iyatoya base off the surface of the moon."

Caufmann turns to Rennin. "Do you think Dead Star can still fly?"

Rennin nods. "There was nothing wrong with it, we just couldn't risk flying after Desolator fired at us."

Caufmann nods to himself. “We can’t bring it here or we’ll cause a mad riot to board it. Get a few people to help us take Antares to it. Leave Drej here, the fact a HolinMech is stationed here is helping morale enormously. Pick just two because they’ll be leaving Raddocks Horizon with you after we get Antares to the lab.”

“With *me*? You’re not coming?”

“No. I received an encrypted communication from Doctor Roths. The HolinMech Warrior squadron has been called and they’ll be sent here. She was to report to Iyatoya but she and Rethrin went to take command of the medical pavilion outside the city. They were afraid of the immune being used as test subjects. Rightly so,” his eyes turn distant. “I would have.”

“Why pick only two others? Many of us thought we were *all* leaving.”

“The smaller the team, the greater the chance of passing unnoticed. You also have all the tactical data and information that those outside *need* to know.”

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The two Rennin picked to leave with him were an obvious choice. Caufmann knew who’d he’d pick, and that’s why he suggested just two. Mia and Drake. He did so predictably. Caufmann still feels glad when he thinks of Rennin flying off on silent mode towards the borders of Raddocks Horizon. The gravity repulsor technology in the gunship could run so close to silent it’s almost inaudible. Though, the engineers haven’t worked out a way to make it very fast just yet. It’s good for patrols, but not tactical engagements. And unfortunately, silent running does not equate with invisibility to lidar scans.

A saved life. A definite saved life. Finally.

William Caufmann is walking around in the basement of the half destroyed Godyssey Laboratory. He’s activated the defence turrets around the complex and has kept his movements quiet. It is a massive risk returning here but Prototype doesn’t seem to be keeping an eye on it at the moment. Caufmann wonders if Prototype thinks he died when Desolator opened fire. Or perhaps since the city has fallen he’s no longer a threat to the progenitor-class. Or maybe it died after Del very nearly tore it to pieces.

First thing’s first.

Antares is entombed once more, though this time in Saifer Veidan’s pod since it’s never been used. Caufmann decides that his own tomb being empty doesn’t sit well with him. If another agent enters the lab and finds the CryoZaiyon Tomb it’ll stand out plain as

day that there's nothing in Nexarien Decora's pillar.

He moves up the corridor to Room V, where the last three members of the CryoGen Team are kept. Timothy Fowl, Warwick Balkan and Jonathon Holin.

Caufmann needs a body for his pod. It doesn't have to be an android, just something with organic life signs. John Holin is the man for the job, he surmises. The man that designed and built the first HolinMech systems. The man who sold the soul of CryoGen Industries to the venomous claws of Godyssey.

Caufmann initiates a crude rapid thaw that results in death eighty percent of the time. It doesn't matter now if Van Gower picks up readings of a thawing stasis tube; with the city's blackout it could be a malfunction for any number of reasons.

The block of ice is saturated in an oozing pink liquid that eats the ice away at an accelerated rate. Again the question crosses his mind: who stole the bodies of Nordoth and Straker? Who knew where they were and how did they get them out without *anyone* noticing?

A thaw that should usually take a week takes just over a day and all the while Caufmann stands there watching, patiently. He has read almost every document about the HolinMech program and the slaves it was to make. *Is* making, in fact.

Over the day of the thaw Caufmann has grown to hate him. This 'man of science' condoned and even patented the transmogrifying technology that turned human men and women into cybernetic thralls of incredible power. This man signed off on men and women being taken from their homes and their families to be experimented on, to have their very identity and soul taken from them. This man was the pioneer of the entire conversion program, the forebear of the Embryon Protocol through Candidacy and beyond.

Caufmann takes his lab coat and shirt off, baring his sea of scars. Surgical scars, blade wounds and bullet holes, all visible, all exposed. He wants Holin to see him when he wakes up. He isn't sure if he'll recognise him but he doesn't care.

When the pink fluid has dissolved all the ice, the naked body of Doctor Jonathon Holin, author of the HolinMech Program, is left shivering on the floor. Caufmann remembers waking up as Nexarien Decora in a very similar fashion. Confused and weak.

Holin isn't reacting to the rapid thaw very well. He is showing most of the symptoms of hypothermia. He's shivering and convulsing, almost fully aware now. As he reaches full consciousness, he rolls from the foetal position onto his back keeping his arms across his chest, squinting up at Caufmann who's standing like a statue over him clutching a V6 Liston knife. It's nearly a foot long with a razor edge on one side and jagged teeth up the back.

Holin's eyes scan up Caufmann's body, his old wounds, his imbedded gauntlet, and finally to his scarred eyes that glow eerily. Holin's eyes focus, his breath stops for just a second, almost a gasp.

Recognition.

"Don't," is all that Holin manages to utter before a violent, powerful cut tears partially through his neck, jamming the knife into the floor.

The blade is stuck firm. Holin is coughing, trembling, trying to beg. Caufmann had intended to ask questions, though they are so far from his mind he can't fathom anything apart from this very sudden, very brutal, aggression.

On any other occasion Caufmann would have cut with refined precision, taking the head clean off. He tries forcing the knife through but it still doesn't move. He feels the knife scrape against Holin's neck bone as he tries to wrench it. Caufmann slaps Holin's reaching hand away from his face. With a grunt of exertion he grips a handful of Holin's hair, dragging his head across the stuck knife. With a final effort and a spray of blood he rips the blade free of the ground, completing the decapitation.

Caufmann is seething far more than he thought possible. The very idea this disgusting butcher knew him means he probably saw him before he was turned into a CryoZaiyon. It meant he was probably one of the surgeons that cut out his humanity and imprisoned the last part of his being within a case, buried in his chest cavity.

As his anger subsides, the words of Antares run through his mind. It occurs to him that after all this time he does feel as strongly for someone as she.

It's just not love.

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He drags the body to his tomb pillar and connects some tubes into the severed arteries and another down the remains of the oesophagus. He shuts the tomb and powers it up. The pillar fills with nano-nutrient water and the tubes come to life, circulating the remaining blood in the body, making infinitesimal life signs on the monitor. Without a head, at first glance the body could be Nexarien Decora and that is enough. He seals all the tombs back within their pillar shell casings, seeing Antares one last time, watching as she is fully encased, and once again safely hidden.

He leaves the CryoZaiyon Tomb and finds himself in Del's birthing chamber further up the hall. Inside, the upright pod chamber Del was hatched from stands empty.

Next to it, in the other pod, is the form of his brother: Adrenin. His formation is at last complete.

Caufmann smiles at Del's younger sibling, another clone of the Suvaco units. This one is so close to the original genome that he'd be indistinguishable at first glance. Caufmann presses a few buttons on the console.

The gestation tank drains of its nutrient water, allowing Caufmann to open the door, inspecting his creation for defects.

Adrenin wakes up a moment before sliding to the floor, unsteady on legs he's never used before. His orange snake-like eyes look up at Caufmann. He attempts to step forwards, but his leg doesn't seem to do as he wishes, so he slips onto the floor. Adrenin looks as baffled as he is able.

Caufmann walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder. "Don't rush yourself. How are you feeling?"

Adrenin coughs up some nutrient fluid from his lungs through his bared, sharp, teeth. "I… am not ready."

Caufmann feels a pang of guilt. That is exactly what Del said. "Nobody is. The mission you were programmed for contains parameters that need to be reset."

Adrenin looks up at Caufmann. "Status?"

"Breaking point. You were to help your brother unit in the field defending the city but Raddocks Horizon is lost. You have a new mission."

"Command channel open," Adrenin announces in a deep resonating voice.

"Del has…" he sighs, "malfunctioned, and needs to be…" he clears his throat, "taken out."

Adrenin's head tilts to one side. "I did all my combat training with him."

"That is irrelevant."

"We fought together and trained together."

"It was all imprinted, it wasn't a real experience. I assure you, the Del you'll come across out there is not the one you know in your head."

"I can't kill my own brother."

Caufmann is now disgusted with himself at how human he's made his two finest creations. "Del has become a very grave threat."

Adrenin looks at his hands, then to his birthing tank, then to Caufmann. "What are my additional orders?"

"You have your brother's mission now, understand?"

Adrenin nods.

Outside Raddocks Horizon in a survivors' encampment, Outbound, Rennin has been in makeshift offices and portable, prefab rooms giving briefings on the conflict for almost two straight days.

Most of it has been like one long interrogation, but the data provided by Caufmann has gone a long way to smooth relations with what's left of the local military presence. Dead Star is one of only three gunships to make it out of Raddocks Horizon. The Horizon Military have been crushed under the contaminant onslaught.

Rennin rubs the back of his neck for the hundredth time today.

This presentation is to the Head of the Defence Force, General Tristan Faraday. He is Rennin's height, mid-fifties, and looks like he's seen one battle too many. The only other person in the room is Doctor Jellan Roths, who stares at him as if her eyes possess Superman's heat vision.

Rennin feels like he's going around in one big circle. "So the general idea is to leave them stranded there 'until further notice'?" he asks with his most polite sarcastic tone. "Even with all this information? The fortified zone in Whitechapel is secure, you can land and pull them out."

"How many Suvaco units are there in total?" asks Faraday.

Rennin shrugs. "I don't know, William didn't say."

"Armed with rockets and chain guns and all Godyssey weaponry?" asks Faraday, eyeing Doctor Roths.

"Stolen from the lab, yes," she answers, meeting the general's gaze.

"We have only three serviceable gunships and we can't risk opening the underground train tunnel gates again in case of contaminants getting out and overrunning this position, you must understand that. And three gunships cannot evacuate civilians that number in the thousands."

"Then call for aid, is it really so hard?" Rennin asks pinching the bridge of his nose hard enough to bruise it.

Faraday takes a breath, returning his regard to Rennin. "Given recent developments that you are as yet unaware of, we should be transiting people back into the fortified zone in Whitechapel."

Rennin looks at him. "What?"

"There won't be any help from outside here," says Faraday slowly.

"Why?" he asks Faraday but the general looks to Roths again. Rennin follows his gaze to Roths. "Why won't there be help coming?" he asks, finding himself smiling in frustrated disbelief, "*Why* won't there be any help coming?"

"There is no one," she answers plainly.

Rennin thinks for a moment but it only takes another second for

the horrible truth to strike home to him. His face drops to a neutral expression and he doesn't want to hear any more.

"No…" he breathes, taking a step back, then finding himself leaning against the wall for support.

"No one here knows yet. Faraday and myself were only informed the day you arrived here," says Roths.

"How far has it spread?" Rennin finds himself asking without wanting to know. Asking is just a reflex.

"Isolated pockets so far in several major cities in this country, heaviest engagement was here. The hotter areas of the country seem to be less affected."

Rennin remembers that the docks are all automated so crates of goods carrying the infection could have spread from here to hundreds of locations all over the world.

"A global pandemic," the room spins a little.

Outside the conference room, Carla is waiting for him. When he emerges from the room she takes one look at his ashen face and takes his hand. Rennin is unresponsive, locked in his own thoughts. He paces forwards a few steps shaking his head, glancing at the horizon.

During his time trapped in the city he looked to the horizon as his goal, for safety. It was meant to be an escape. Reaching his goal has just crushed it. So recently that horizon was a hopeful goal, but now all it inspires is cold dread. In every direction there's a horizon with another Raddocks Horizon happening at every one of them.

A strike to his face snaps him out of his daydreaming to a throbbing pain in his cheek. He comes back to reality to see Carla shaking her right hand and wincing in pain.

"What was that for?" he asks.

"We're even now," she says.

Seeing Carla again when he arrived three days ago was the happiest moment of his life, but now it feels tainted. No one is safe anywhere now. "Fifteen all, then."

"What's wrong?"

He looks into her eyes and his voice will not let him speak. He scans the perimeter of Raddocks Horizon. "I think the seriousness of all this just hit home," he says, satisfied that he didn't technically lie to her.

"It hasn't ended here, has it?" she asks and his eyes meet hers briefly, long enough to her to read his mind. She reflexively grips his hand tighter. "Everywhere?"

"Not yet."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know, I have absolutely no idea, but we're not separating again. I'll probably shit the bed at some stage, but I'll never leave

you," he says forcing a smirk.

"Jesus, what an offer…"

He doesn't know how to really transfer his brutally primal urge to protect her into eloquent words so he goes with something simple. "Just stay close, alright?"

General Faraday bursts out of the cabin, making a beeline for the operations tent. Rennin can't help but follow as if he is a dog chasing a car. Faraday may be old but at the moment he's moving like an Olympic sprinter.

He shoves the tent curtain out of the way, storming headlong into the chaos within. The military nerve centre for this outpost is filled with people scrambling to and between instrument panels like hyperactive ants. Faraday bursts in. "Is it confirmed?"

"Yes, sir. The ship has lost control," says a technician.

Rennin catches the part about a ship out of control. "What's happening?"

Faraday ignores him. "What is its altitude?"

"Receiving a signal," says the technician patching it over the speakers.

There's a scratchy voice over the airways. "I…toya. Iyat…a. Thi… s Res…ue One, th…verest. We… going down!"

Rennin backs out of the tent and looks up to the sky, knowing what he's about to see. Falling from the sky is a re-entry fuelled fireball that can only be the Everest, shuttle of the Alpha HolinMech strike team.

It is hurtling towards the surface with no sign of slowing, like a flaming meteor. Rennin feels a cold stab of resignation as he watches it come down.

Epilogue

Two weeks after the fall of Raddocks Horizon, William Caufmann is still holed up in the remains of the Godyssey Laboratory. Contact with the Outbound camp has been lost. There has been no word from anyone. Any attempts at communication with the outside world have failed. As far as he can tell he's alone, again.

He has done his best to track Del's movements around the dead city but his creation has proven to be quite elusive. Regaining some surveillance around the city by filtering the lab's emergency power to certain sections should have helped.

It took him a day to find the HolinMech crash site via his rudimentary camera control. By the time he had located it, the ship was empty, with no indication of where they may be headed, or where they are now. Except for one. But it's no HolinMech.

En route towards him is a warped CryoZaiyon transponder signal. There are significant changes to the system but the transponder is giving off a clear enough signature for him to know what it is. It can only be the repurposed shell of Forgal Lauros.

It is unclear what the intentions of this HolinMech husk might be.

Despite wanting to ask a great many questions of his former Commander, Caufmann knows that, if Lauros is hostile, he cannot hope to subdue him. If he has the element of surprise, he can deal with him in a way that doesn't require strength.

The night of the Gorai Aurelia Rally, Rennin shot Prototype with an accelerated corroder to slow it down. In Caufmann's hand, he holds the updated version. Specifically designed to dissolve Thermosteel, its effects will be thorough and final.

In any other circumstance, it is not a weapon he would use. It can just as easily destroy his body if he so much as touches Lauros.

As the distance between him and the distorted reading steadily reduces, he draws the corroding agent into a syringe.

Who are you now?

Before him, he sets out a dozen hollow point bullets. There's no guarantee they will get past an android's kinetic barrier, but it's still the most reliable way to deploy the chemical.

Caufmann holds the tip of the needle over the first of the bullets, squeezing very gently until he can see a bead form at the tip. The doctor knows this simple drop itself is enough to destroy all of them. It will devour the Thermosteel within android and contaminant alike, with no regard, no mercy. This tiny morsel could end it.

The drop falls.

Everything.